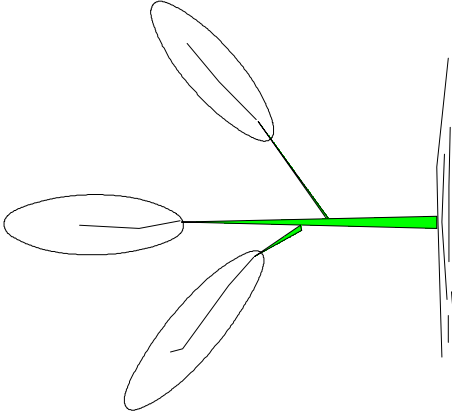


an act of the will. Notice verse 16 – the one human response that is needed to gain eternal life is faith. It is the final key that releases the new birth that God brings about within the individual by the Holy Spirit. In 2 Corinthians 5.17 Paul puts it this way, “*When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come.*” When people reach up to God, they are reaching up to the one who is already reaching down to them, who has loved them with an everlasting love, who sent his Son to pay the penalty for their sins. No wonder all heaven is let loose!



• What do we expect to happen when a person comes to faith in Christ?

• What is the response of our average church member to news of someone who has come to conversion and new birth?

5. Conversion and New Birth

Bible References: John 3.1-21; 2 Corinthians 5.11-21.

Our previous session focussed on “evangelising” and noted that this is a clear part of “Christ’s mission in the world.. The next circle in our original diagram has to do with “nurturing” and the *Regulations* puts this high on the agenda – **(b) nurturing the members and adherents in their growth in grace.**

In this session we are in fact considering the line between these two areas of responsibility. Think again about that definition of evangelism – “Evangelism is so to present Jesus Christ to the world in the power of the Holy Spirit that men and women shall come to put their trust in God through him, accept him as their Saviour and serve him as their Lord in the fellowship of his Church.” Evangelism is intentionally sharing the Good News.

The parable of the sower (Matthew 13.3-9) reminds us that people may respond in a variety of ways. But what did the sower expect? Did he mean to scatter food for the crows? Sometimes we blame the sower for his carelessness. But the parable is about human readiness to respond – and we are not really as fixed and unchangeable as the soils! The sower expected a good crop!

Evangelism is intentionally sharing the Good News, and people respond in a variety of ways. But we evangelise with expectations “that men and women shall come to put their trust in God through him, accept him as their Saviour and serve him as their Lord in the fellowship of his Church.” Our responsibility to “nurture” assumes that something has happened, that the seed has germinated, that there is life and therefore the possibility of growth.

There are two important aspects to consider here – the human response to the Good News that we call conversion and the divine infusion of life that we call the new birth.

Conversion

The Greek word that is translated “convert” in the New Testament simply means “turn” or “turn back”. It is almost always in the active voice. In almost all instances where the King James Version has “be converted”, other translations put the “action” with the human person concerned. Consider, for example, Acts 3.19 – “*Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...*” (KJV); “*Repent, then, and turn to God, so that he will forgive your sins*” (GNB).

In this passage, the people were being called to do two things – repent and turn to God. Having said that “conversion” refers to our turning to God, it is important to emphasise that it is God, through the Holy Spirit, who brings people to the point of conversion, that he seals the conversion with the new birth and that the new-born soul will only continue to grow through his grace.

As Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:8-9 – “For it is by God’s grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God’s gift, so that no one can boast about it.”

The “turning” of conversion may take place in widely different ways. For Paul there was a definite time and place that he could never forget – on the Damascus road on the way to persecute more Christians (Acts 9:1-19). That was true for Zacchaeus too (Luke 19:1-10). But what about young Timothy who had grown up under the believing example and teaching of his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice (2 Timothy 1:5)?

When we lived in Toowoomba, we were conscious of the Great Divide as a range. It marked suddenly and dramatically the division between the rolling Downs and the coastal plain. Geographically, it is at that point the watershed between streams feeding the Murray-Darling system and those feeding the Brisbane River. My wife spent some of her childhood at the Central Queensland town of Jericho and went to Alpha for piano lessons. There is no range to mark the Divide, yet it is there between those towns – a watershed between inland and coastal streams.

It is not a question whether people can point to the “landmark” or “watershed” in the lives – but whether they are now “flowing God’s way” by faith in Christ. Sadly there are people who respect God, respect the Bible, respect Christian values, who have spent their lives **turning** but have never **turned** – in other words, they are not converted.

• What are the evidences in your own life that you have “crossed the divide”? For you, was it sudden and dramatic, much more gradual or almost unnoticed yet very real?

Steps in Conversion

Again and again in the New Testament, we see **repentance** and **faith** closely associated with conversion. We could say that they represent the “from” and the “to” of conversion. Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians, “*You turned away from idols to God...*” (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Repentance is a turning away from sin and from dependence on our own good works for salvation. Faith is a turning to God in dependence on God’s work of salvation in Jesus Christ and in submission to his Lordship over our lives.

Repentance must be linked to the positive turning of faith. Some people are filled with sorrow for their sins (or for themselves) but never turn in faith to the God who freely offers them forgiveness in the Lord Jesus Christ. The notable

example here is Judas Iscariot who “repented and took back the thirty silver coins... then he went off and hanged himself” (Matthew 27:3,5).

Clearly, he had not turned to God in faith. In similar vein, the lost son in Jesus’ story (Luke 15:11-32) grieved over his life in the far country and the hurt his sin had caused to his father. But he didn’t leave the matter there – he returned to his father.

Thinking about conversion, then, there are a number of things that take place in the area of mind, emotions and will. Faith in God has sometimes erroneously been called “a leap in the dark”. I am well aware that there is a truth in the statement – it could equally be said that marriage is a leap in the dark, in the sense that nobody ever knows all that is involved in marriage on the wedding-day! But there are things that need to happen in our **mind**, our understanding – about the other person, about marriage, about financial realism, our having and raising children. Yes, there is also a growing **emotion** of love towards the other person – but a real problem exists where that emotion does not go hand-in-hand with our understanding. And there is – and this is where the marriage itself takes place – an act of the **will** in which we are committed for life to the other person as husband or wife.

In the same way, there is an intellectual convictionment about God, about the Bible, about who Jesus is, about the meaning of the Cross, about the resurrection... without which conversion is not real. There is also the appeal of the love of God against the backdrop of our past hurts, of the guilt of past failures and the emptiness of much of our life. But conversion, like marriage, come about at the point when our will chooses to respond to God in faith, love and obedience.

• What are the intellectual, emotional and volitional steps through which we can, by the grace of God and in the power of his Spirit, lead others to conversion?

The New Birth

When people come to that act of will, the miracle of the New Birth occurs. It is then possible (and necessary) for us to nurture them “*in their growth in grace*”.

In John 3 we read about Nicodemus, an earnest, good-living Jew, a member of the Jewish ruling council. Already he was along the road of intellectual convictionment about Jesus. He believed that the miracles of Jesus showed that he had come from God and that God was with him. He came at night – he was not out to trick, to ridicule or to score points. He sincerely wanted to know more. Coming at night also gave him opportunity to get more of the “feel” of Jesus’ personality. It gave Jesus the means to speak to the deep spiritual needs which this highly moral man could not put well into a question. Already there was an emotional element in the relationship. But Jesus was in fact calling Nicodemus to