

The Holy Spirit in Conversion

By: Jason Cole

Throughout the centuries one of the most intensely studied and debated topics is the role that the Holy Spirit plays on a person leading them to conversion. This debate is further complicated by the strong influence of Calvinism. It seems that the Calvinist position on the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion has become the accepted view not only in Protestantism, but also in the Restoration Movement. Many of the early pioneers of the Restoration Movement really wrestled with this subject due to their roots in Calvinist denominations.

The view that is espoused by Calvinists is that the Holy Spirit works primarily apart from the Word of God and apart from preaching to convert a person. They would teach that the Holy Spirit does some miraculous work on a person before they can ever be converted. This view is necessary due to their theology. Calvinism begins with the doctrine of Original Sin. They teach that each person has inherited the guilt of Adam's sin. Due to that guilt, they would say that man is totally depraved. In other words, man is totally unable to do anything good, anything spiritual on his own. As a result, they would say that it is not even possible for man to believe or have faith unless God gives it to them miraculously. They would love to cite Ephesians 2 and claim that faith is a gift from God. The problem is that Paul did not say that faith is a gift from God. Paul said that salvation by grace is a gift of God. Faith is a reasonable and rational acceptance of clear testimony.

However, the question remains, what exactly does the Bible say? How does the Holy Spirit work in conversion? Does the Holy Spirit work miraculously on a sinner's hearts apart from the Word of God? I content that the work of the Holy Spirit upon a person is through the Word of God and through the preaching of the Word of God.

I do think it is important to make a distinction between the Holy Spirit's work and God's providence. I absolutely believe that God works providentially to bring people into a place where they are more ready to hear and understand the Gospel. By providence, I am speaking of God's stepping into

man's realm to affect things. Perhaps God can cause or allow circumstances that brings a person to the place where they can hear the Gospel. It seems that God was working providentially in the city of Philippi to create circumstances that would cause the jailer to hear Paul's message. However, his conversion was not separate from Paul's preaching.

Jesus said, "if you seek, you will find." I believe that if a person starts sincerely seeking God, it is amazing that God tends to providentially cause that person to be around the preaching of the Gospel. However, that person's salvation does not come independent of the Word of God. In John 16, Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit would come and His role would be to convict.

⁸And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; ⁹concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; ¹¹and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged."

Jesus was making it clear that after Jesus' coming, death, and resurrection that any rejection was different. It was different because people would no longer be simply rejecting the Law of Moses, but they would be rejecting the Son of God. As a result, the Holy Spirit's conviction of people would come through the clear apostolic word that would be preached.

1 Peter 1:23 says, "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is through the living and enduring word of God." Peter clearly proclaims that the Word of God is the agency that God uses to cause a person to be born again. Notice that Peter did not speak of some miraculous act that forced a change of a person's will. He spoke of the new birth that came out of the word of God.

The Calvinists would make two major errors. First, they would reject the importance of the Word of God upon an unbeliever. Peter clearly says that we are born again of the word of God. Hebrews 4:12 says, "the word of God is living and active and sharper than a double-edged sword." Romans 1:16 says, "the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation." James 1:18 says, "he brought us forth by the word of truth." It is the power of the word of God working on people's hearts that brings

them to conviction. I do not discount that the Holy Spirit is involved in this conviction, but what the Bible plainly teaches is that this come through the word of God.

The Calvinist would answer these objections by stating that the unsaved person cannot understand the things of God. They do not believe it is possible for an unsaved person to comprehend any spiritual things whatsoever until the Holy Spirit does some work inside them. This idea is nothing more than a modern version of pagan mysticism. The truth of the matter is that lost people can understand spiritual things just fine. The words of the Bible are able to be understood by any person. A person may be able to pick up any book and understand the syntax and grammar. The same is true with the Bible. Certainly there are some difficult concepts and some things that we cannot comprehend even as saved people, however, there is nothing mystical that keeps a non-Christian from grasping the ideas of the Gospel. There is nothing mystical that allows a Christian to understand the Gospel. The Gospel is a rational proposition. It is either to be accepted or rejected.

When you read through the New Testament, you can see plenty of unsaved people understanding spiritual things. The crowds picked up stones to stone Jesus not because they were unsure of what He was teaching, but rather because they understood exactly what He meant. The early church was opposed and persecuted not because it was misunderstood, but rather because the Gospel was understood. Paul called the Gospel a stumbling block. It was not a stumbling block or a scandal because unbelievers could not understand it. It was scandalous because they did not like what it demanded. The world tends to find the Gospel to be foolishness because they understand it, not because they cannot comprehend it. 2 Thessalonians 2:14 states that we are called by way of the Gospel. It is the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God that brings about conviction. Paul said in Romans 10:17 that "faith comes from hearing and hearing the Word of Christ."

The Bible is not some dead letter that has no power or effect upon the hearts of mankind. While the Calvinists want to make the work of the Holy Spirit about some type of non-rational emotion

rather than an objective response to the clear proposition of the Gospel. This is why they rely on some type of conversion experience as evidence of their salvation rather than a reasonable, rational response. The agency that God uses to bring about conviction through the Holy Spirit is the Word of God. There is no evidence of the Holy Spirit working on man apart from, contrary to or separate from the Word of God.

Second, the Calvinist would reject the power of preaching. The Bible teaches that it is by the foolishness of preaching that people are saved. It was Peter preaching the Word of God on the Day of Pentecost that led the 3,000 to ask, "what must we do to be saved?" The Ethiopian Eunuch asked, "how can I understand without someone preaching to me?" Paul said, "how can they believe unless someone preaches to them?" God's plan of redemption has been that the preaching of the Word of God would be the vehicles which He would use to make the Gospel known to the world. The Calvinist would rely more on some miraculous move of the Holy Spirit separate from preaching to convert. They would say that it is not their job to convert, it is the job of the Holy Spirit. If that is the case, we know that it is God's will for all to be saved, why are some not converted?

In the Parable of the Sower we see why some were not converted. The problem was never with God. The problem was never with the weakness or inability of the word of God. The reason all the seed does not bear fruit is because of the world, because of Satan or because of the individual's rejection and unbelief.

Perhaps some would think it sounds less spiritual to suggest that the way the Holy Spirit works in conversion is through the Word of God, but that is what the Scriptures teach. Yes, God is at work providentially to bring people to the place where they can hear the Gospel. But that does not mean that the Holy Spirit performs some type of mystical miracle which causes unbelievers to become converted. Conversion is a rational response to the clear teachings and propositions presented in the Gospel.

In recent times, there seems to be a wide acceptance of the Calvinist teaching without a clear searching of the Scriptures. People tend to think that they sound more spiritual if they talk about the Holy Spirit converting a person. This teaching is not just present inside Catholic and Protestant churches, but is also common within Restoration Movement churches. There would be some that would accuse us of rejecting the Holy Spirit and His work altogether. I disagree. We do not discount the role and work of the Holy Spirit in today's world. What we contend is that the way in which the Holy Spirit works in conversion is through the Word of God and the preaching of the Gospel. Following that conviction man has a choice to accept it or to reject it. I do not believe that the solution today is to accept mysticism and call it spirituality. I do not believe that the solution is to embrace emotionalism and reject logic and reason. It is not less spiritual to believe that a person is saved because they hear and understand the Gospel, have come to their own senses and then by faith is willing to obey the Gospel. We do not need a miraculous working of the Holy Spirit on the heart of the unbeliever, outside the Word of God to produce fruit. What we need is faithful preaching of the Gospel. We still believe that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. We still believe that faith comes from hearing. We still believe that we are called to salvation through the Gospel.