

THE NEW BIRTH AND CONVERSION

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There has always been wonderful converted Christian people who have gone to their graves not having all of the hidden recesses of their hearts opened to their understanding. John Wesley was used of God for reforming English Protestantism. He taught Christian perfection not rightly understanding the truth of Jesus' cleansing ministry in the sanctuary. Yet, he founded a Sunday-keeping church which to this day does not recognize the fourth commandment seventh-day Sabbath. Certainly this was an unknown sin to Wesley.

Martin Luther was used of God to proclaim and articulate in writing the truth of God's love in justification by faith. He understood it in its legal sense as God's forgiveness of the sinner. What should follow from that is sanctification where one lives a holy life. Luther never connected healthful living as the body as the temple of God with justification. So he worked on his beer-belly. He also opposed the sabbatarians as fanatics. Here was a converted man with hidden sin gone unrecognized to his grave.

The point is there are many such Christians who in the times of their ignorance God has winked at and laid to rest. They sleep until the resurrection. They were never a final demonstration of the gospel of Christ which reconciles completely alienated hearts to Himself. However, they lived up to all the light which they understood and God is merciful.

Many such individuals have had to endure persecution for righteousness' sake. God sustained them. However, God knows that in the great controversy between Christ and Satan, the cross of Christ will be replayed thousands of times over around the globe. Satan seeks to win the war by unleashing his terrorism upon the saints. Hence, Jesus will produce a people who will stand unmoved by His grace.

The mark of the beast issue is what lies ahead. We are lulled into security by the thought that such persecution could not take place in Christian America much less on a worldwide scale. That Christians could be persecuted for Sabbath-keeping and not worshipping on Sunday seems inconceivable.

However, the civil liberties and religious freedoms that we now take for granted could suddenly disappear. The two great principles upon which our country, the leader of the free world, were established are Protestantism and a representative republic. The protesting nature of the churches against the paganizing of Christianity is virtually nonexistent. Protestantism has joined hands with Rome in all its teachings. Our representative republic of government of the people, by the people and for the people, is fast becoming a monopolized grab for power by a wealthy, ruling oligarchy, who do not listen to the people. Liberty-loving people today will oppress the consciences of their fellowmen and revive the religious persecutions of

the Dark Ages. “National apostasy will be followed by national ruin.”¹

Only the gospel can produce a truly converted people who will pass the test of the mark of the beast. They will be genuine gold through and through with no known or unknown sin. If there should be any vestige of sin it would come out in the day of trial.

For example, was Peter an unconverted man going into the crucifixion. All it took for him to deny Jesus was a conversation with a simple peasant girl. Hardly a test at all. The Lord had previously told Peter he was an unconverted man. “And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren. And he said unto him, Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death. And he said, I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me” (Luke 22:31-34). There was something unknown to Peter which caused his collapse in the hour of crisis. What was it? Surely we cannot come to the mark of the beast issue and give up to our shame!

The heart of the issue was to later come more sharply into focus for Peter when following His resurrection Christ asked him three times “Lovest thou me?” (John 21:15-17). Before the cross love had not been perfected in Peter, therefore self-

¹ (R&H Dec. 18, 1888)

preservation and self-centeredness was the ruling principle of his life as an unconverted man. He had not yet learned the principle of the cross.

There are uncounted numbers of Christians who are attracted to Jesus for selfish reasons. They don't want to die and burn forever. They prefer going to heaven and living in condominiums with an address on golden streets. But the one constant before meeting Christ as well as after is that self is still firmly in place. The worship of self is disguised as the worship of Christ. This is the unconscious sin.

There is abundant testimony in the Bible regarding unknown sin in people who claim God. In Jeremiah's day the priests and people were not aware of their apostasy. They argued with God thus: “How can you say, ‘I am not defiled; I have not followed the baalim’? . . . You say, ‘I am innocent. . . But I shall challenge your claim to have done no sin” (Jer. 2:23, 35, REB). Their supposed self-declaration of loyalty and worship toward God was in reality self-worship in following Baal.

The final sin of sins that filled up their descendants' cup of iniquity was an unknown one, for Jesus prayed for His murderers, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). Thus the greatest sin ever committed was one “they do not know,” an unconscious one, done by the religious people of God's chosen nation on earth.

And that sin remains the fundamental sin of the whole world even today: “That prayer of Christ for His enemies embraced the world. It took in every

sinner that had lived or should live, from the beginning of the world to the end of time. Upon all rests the guilt of crucifying the Son of God.”²

Why is this So? Because “every sinner” by nature would do that awful deed if he had not repented and thus been redeemed from it. Given the right circumstances, the right pressures, “every sinner” would do no better than those people did two thousand years ago. We actually crucify Christ afresh in all lovelessness of our brethren or our fellow-men. The inhumanity of man toward man is in reality inhumanity toward Christ. “The books of heaven record the sins that would have been committed had there been opportunity” (5BC 1085). If they “record” such sins, it is obvious that such sins must eventually be blotted out because a record is permanent until erased.

There is an important truth implicit in the message of Christ’s righteousness—no one of us is innately better than another; all genuine righteousness is imputed by Christ. Luther wisely said, “One should exercise mercy, for we are all made of the dough of which prostitutes and fornicators are made. If we stand, we stand by grace alone; otherwise our piety stands on a wisp of straw and soon collapses.”³

This principle is expressed as follows:

“We are still in a world where Jesus, the Son of God, was rejected and crucified, where the guilt of despising Christ and preferring a robber . . . still rests. Unless we individually repent . . . we shall lie

² (DA 745)

³ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, ed. Ewald M. Plass, Vol. III, p. 4263.

under the full condemnation that the action of choosing Barabbas instead of Christ merited. The whole world stands charged today with the deliberate rejection and murder of the Son of God. . . . All . . . would act the same part, were the opportunity granted, as did the Jews and people of the time of Christ. They would be partakers of the same spirit that demanded the death of the Son of God.”⁴

The ancient Jews were so fixated on self-preservation as a nation from the threat of Rome that they did not discern by faith their true Messiah. Therefore their representative high priest, Caiaphas, argued a sociological reason for the crucifixion of Christ. Caiaphas argued that it was “expedient” that one die for the nation rather than for all to die at the hands of the Romans. To Caiaphas, crucifying the Son of God is not sin; it is merely an unpleasant administrative necessity.

So unbelief was the root cause for the crucifixion of Jesus. This was belief in the law of self-preservation, “for whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

An example of obviously unconscious sin is Hazael. He was “astonished . . . when the prophet told him of his future course”: “‘I know the evil that you will do to the children of Israel: Their strongholds you will set on fire . . . and their young men you will kill with the sword; and you will dash their children, and rip open their women with child.’ So Hazael said, ‘But what is your servant—a dog,

⁴ (TM 38)

that he should do this gross thing?” (2 Kings 8:12, 13; MYP 278). Probably Hitler in his youth also never dreamed of the evil he was capable of doing.

Many converted people have died while in a state of ignorantly committing unknown sins. Christ imputes His righteousness to them, He substitutes for them. But the point of the Seventh-day Adventist sanctuary doctrine is that He cannot remain an Intercessor and Substitute forever. *The issues we are now concerned about is not getting ready for death, but for translation.* Otherwise, Seventh-day Adventism has no valid reason to exist.

The books of heaven are accurate “photographs” or [“daguerreotypes”]⁵ of the characters of God’s people. Sins can not be blotted out of the books of heaven until first they are cleansed from the hearts of God’s people on earth, not merely excused, pardoned, or forgiven. And the last root, the very taproot, of sin must be eliminated.

The real issue is whether there is a practical change of our behavior significance to the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, or whether that High Priestly ministry is merely a ritual performed millions of light years away from us, without relation to human hearts.

As we have seen, the taproot of sin is unbelief, alienation from God, enmity against Him. It participates in the murder of the Son of God—the very sin of which “the whole world stands charged today” apart from specific repentance. All other sins are mere fruit growing from that root.

⁵ (7BC 972)

The Lord’s servant took pains to tell us of Peter’s shameful failure after he was so sure that he could never deny his Lord. He did not know his own heart (DA 673 and 713):

“Self-confidence led him to the belief that he was saved. . . . Never can we safely put confidence in self or feel this side of heaven, that we are secure against temptation. Those who accept the Saviour, however sincere their conversions should never be taught to say or to feel that they are saved. This is misleading. . .

“It was necessary for Peter to learn his own defects of character.”⁶

We have the counsel—“however sincere their *conversion*” those who follow Christ “should never” claim or *feel* that “I am saved.” Is not such a claim virtually the same as to feel that one is fully and finally “converted?” It is much wiser to say, “I am *being* saved, I am in the *process* of being saved, I have given my heart to the Lord and I am following on to know Him, I have chosen to serve Him and I seek to be newly converted every day.” Conversion is as long as we’re breathing. There is no stopping point. There is no point that we can say I’ve arrived. I’ve finally been converted.

A little foetus starts growing natured in its mother’s womb. At first it’s observable only as a small golf-ball-size object. But everyday it grows exponentially bigger and bigger until one can identify arms and legs and the head and torso. This new life must

⁶ (COL 155)

grow every day. If for some sad reason life ceases to grow, a self-abortion occurs.

When Jesus says we “must be born again,” He is not talking about a program of works. Can’t be; nobody can give birth to himself. We must *be* born, passive voice of the verb. And who does the conceiving and “giving birth”? Jesus says (verse 8), as you can’t tell where the wind comes from or goes, “so is everyone that is born of the Spirit.” It is He who conceives in you the new life and gives birth to the new heart; you welcome the new birth, you *let* it happen, you stop the abortion practice you’ve been doing all your life prior. Call it cooperation if you wish, but please don’t think of it as being 50% your own Saviour. You cooperate by letting Him do His blessed will in you. And when all is done at last, to Him alone will you give all the glory.

Should one be worried about whether he is “born again”? The answer is No. You can’t be worried about giving birth to yourself, because no one can do that for himself. Only the Holy Spirit can give new life. The Holy Spirit is constantly planting good news seeds of the truth of the gospel in order to give life.

But should one be seriously concerned about whether he is truly converted? The answer is, Yes. Right up to the moment when the Sanhedrim condemned Jesus to death, the apostle Peter was dead sure he was well converted. When Jesus told him Thursday night that he was not, he became upset, and loudly protested his being thoroughly “born again.” In his conscious understanding, he

sincerely believed he was already “converted,” but when a mere lass (probably an attractive one) challenged his identity with Christ, his unconscious motivations took over and he denied Christ with vile cursing and swearing (Mt. 26:74). Peter did not know himself! One can be very highly educated and know a lot of things—yet not know that.

And who is “Peter”? Anyone who belongs to the seventh church of world history, “the church of the Laodiceans” (Rev. 3:14-21; well, more particularly, anyone who is part of “the angel of the church,” its leadership). Jesus tells us frankly that “Peter” is indeed our patron “saint”: “You say, “I am rich, have become wealthy [by some assumed historical enrichment!] and have need of nothing,”—and do not know that you are [the one of all the seven, Greek, *ho*] wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked,” strutting around on the stage of the universe and of the world—“naked.” “The message to the Laodicean church reveals our condition as a people . . . Ministers and church-members are in danger of allowing self to take the throne. . . If they would see their defective, distorted characters as they are accurately reflected in the mirror of God’s Word, they would be so alarmed that they would fall upon their faces before God in contrition of soul, and tear away the rags of their self-righteousness.”⁷

Poor Peter made a fool of himself, thinking he was “rich” in his born-again experience and knowledge. He even argued with the all-knowing Lord, contradicting Him as if to say, “Lord, You don’t

⁷ (R&H Dec. 15, 1904)

know me! Give me a chance, and I'll prove to You that I am the most devoted follower You have! I've been (a) baptized, (b) ordained to the ministry, (c) have cast out devils in Your name, (d) finished my 3½ years Seminary training with *cum laude* under You as Teacher, (d) have my doctoral diploma, (e) I really understand Your gospel and I teach it powerfully. Lord, do You think I need to go back to the spiritual kindergarten and start over and get 'born again' again?!! You're wrong, Lord!" Sadly, the Lord had to tell him honestly, "When you are converted, strengthen your brethren" (Lk. 22:32).

Why should we be "concerned" about our true conversion? Not because of craven fear lest we won't make it into the kingdom, but for a more important reason: lest in our unconscious selfishness we bring shame on Him in these closing hours of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. The best Laodicean in the world can well pray that prayer, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Lk. 18:13). Edward R. Sill probably had an even better idea in his heart-wrenching poem: "O Lord, be merciful to me, a fool!"

No one has yet seen what is the dynamic factor that produces the new birth, because love can never be seen. Jesus told Nicodemus in advance the story of His cross, which of course he couldn't understand that night. But what he heard stayed deep in his mind until he saw what happened; then it all came together, and he stepped out of his closet to identify openly with Christ.

Jesus explained further: "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from

heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:13-15, NIV).

He alludes to something that happened during Israel's wilderness wanderings. The people were journeying through the desert to their Promised Land (yes, there were hardships). But true to form for all of us humans, they had to make their difficulties worse by believing bad news: "The people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?'" (Numbers 21:4, 5, NIV). They were not about to die, for God was leading them; this was a specter of doom that they themselves invoked, without reason (see Psalm 105:37). Their doubt became pure unbelief, borrowing troubles that were only figments of their faithless imagination. But to do so was sin.

The people's sinful unbelief and murmuring had deprived them of God's special protection which would have been theirs by right. Moses' making a snake of brass and holding it up high on a pole was an acted prophecy of Christ to be uplifted on His cross.

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' ... Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived" (Numbers 21:8, 9, NIV).

But how could a poisonous snake represent Him? Here is the answer: He was "made ... to be sin for

us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21, KJV). We see how close Christ has come to us. He never sinned, but He identified with us so closely that He “took” our fallen, sinful nature. He was “made” to be something that He was not. In that reality is our salvation from the “serpents.”

See how easy the healing was: all the people had to do was look. Jesus is telling Nicodemus: there is something to see on that cross—look. But it is more than gazing at a crucifix. “Looking” is believing in the sense of a heart appreciation of what it cost the One who died there to “be made sin for us,” and save us. (It meant that He died the death that we have deserved.)

An appreciation of what He did is what brings healing to a sin-sick person. And, of course, healing is exactly the same as that new birth.

Then Jesus spoke the well-known words that have become the most loved verse of the entire Bible: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16, NIV).

This is illustrated in a man who committed crime after crime in an effort to cover up his first mistake. Worst of all, he did nothing to prevent an innocent man from being sent to prison when he himself should have been the one jailed. As so often happens to a criminal, he lost his sense of fairness and kindness, and his wife and children left him. His home was ruined. Yet that hard-hearted man would not repent. He insisted: “I cannot, I will not, I dare not, I must not!”

Finally the innocent man who was wrongfully in prison did an unusual thing. He wrote the hard-hearted man a letter, forgiving him for all the wrong he had done to him. Can you imagine? That letter broke the heart of that evil man and brought him to repentance and confession of his crimes. He said, “All the troubles that came to me failed to bring me to repentance; but when I was forgiven, I repented.” Fear can never drive you to be a better person, but realizing that you are forgiven—that does it.