

“Core Christianity”
“Conversion: We *Can* Start Over Again”

Have you ever come to the place in your life when you may have thought, "I wish I could start all over again"? This message addresses that human longing!

Last week in this series on basic Christian beliefs I talked about human nature. The Biblical view of human nature is that we are a mix of good and evil. We are made in the image of God, with tremendous potential to do good, to act unselfishly and heroically. But there is also this dark, evil side to human nature that the Bible calls “sin”. We are often chained to self-interest, to putting self and what *we* want at the center of life rather than God. This evil aspect of our nature separates us from God and destroys human relationships. The reality is: we can’t overcome this evil side of our human nature by ourselves. We need divine help.

One of the central themes of Christianity is that God has addressed this human condition. He sent Jesus to forgive us and set us free from the evil that lurks within us.

When we put our faith in Christ and surrender to Him, certain things happen. ***We are “justified”.*** ***The term is “justification.*** Justification has to do with how we can come before a holy God and be counted as a righteous person. How can us sinful people become acceptable to a God who hates evil?

The Bible teaches that we are made right with God ***not*** by the good things we do, but by what *Christ has done for us*. Hear the words from Romans 3, verses 20, and 23-24. "For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

These verses tell us that we can't make ourselves right with God by trying to do good and by keeping God's laws. Because, no one can fully keep *all* of God's laws. The law just exposes our sin. Verse 23 says all have sinned. Then, notice, it says “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” We are made right with God as a ***gift***, through what Christ has done (by “grace” - it's not something we can earn or deserve).

You may say, “Harry, are you trying to say that all the good things I do can never make me right with God or acceptable to God?” *You got it!!*

The flaw in insisting that I can be acceptable to God by being a good person is that this fails to take into account the depth of our sin and how far our sins have separated us from a holy God. Let us muse an analogy here. Let's compare the goal of our standing right with God to people trying to swim across the Atlantic Ocean. I'm going to try it! Now I can swim, but not very well. I'm a bad swimmer. So, if I'm lucky, I may get 25, or perhaps 50 feet out to sea. By that time, I'm done. Then someone else, a decent swimmer, starts out, and swims for 10 minutes, then gets tired and bows out. Someone else is a really good swimmer - he or she has won some swim races in high school, or college. This person gets even further across the ocean.

Then we have some really, really, good swimmers try it. For instance, Trent Grimsley (who in 2012 set the record for the fastest crossing of the English Channel, at 6 hours, 55 minutes), or Alison Streeter (who has swam across the English Channel 43 times), or Ashwin Krishnasamy (who swam across the channel at the age of 12!). They get much further than the others, but fall way short of the goal of crossing the ocean.

You see the point? Whether you're a bad swimmer like me, a good swimmer, or a powerhouse swimmer - no one comes near swimming across the Atlantic Ocean. Whether you're a bad person, a good person, or a really good person, none of us can begin to overcome the tremendous chasm between a holy God and us. *That can only happen when we acknowledge that we're only acceptable to God through Christ - and we trust Christ to make us right with God.*

The *Articles of Religion* of the former Methodist Church speak to this. It says, "*We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own work or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by faith, only, is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort.*"

Romans 5:1 says, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Being made right with God brings us inward peace!

Justification is something *objective* that happens between us and God. We are given a new status with God. We are declared "righteous". *But it also has an effect on our life. It changes us!*

Historically, Christians call this change "conversion" or the "new birth". Have you ever heard someone talk about their "conversion to Christ"? Like, "I was converted when I was 18 years old...". The word "conversion" means to turn around or change. People don't use the word "conversion" much anymore, but it is a valid word, a Biblical word. For instance, look at the words of Jesus, in Matthew 18:3: "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

When we meet Jesus and put our faith in Him, He changes us! He makes our life different, from the inside out! 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he (or she) is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." What great imagery here! Just as God created the world, fresh and new and good, God begins a "new creation" inside of us that begins to change us in a deep and profound way.

Another way the Bible describes the change Christ brings about in us is that it's like a new birth, like being born all over again. One night a man named Nicodemus came to Jesus. They talked, and in the conversation Jesus said that Nicodemus, and *everyone else*, needed to be born again to get into the kingdom of God. Let's pickup the conversation in John 3:3-6: "Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.' 'How can someone be born when they are old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!' Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the

Spirit gives birth to spirit." The Greek here can read "born again" or "born anew" or "born from above".

When we are born *physically*, we enter the physical realm as a new baby. When we are *born again*, or reborn *spiritually*, we enter the spiritual realm, and are brought into the family of God as a new baby in Christ!

I've noticed over the years when I talk about the need to be "born again", some people feel uneasy, or even get upset. Why? Why are some people so resistant to this truth that we need to be born again if we're going to see the kingdom of God? (Remember, Jesus is the one who said it - I'm just the messenger!) . What's so offensive about people being born again and becoming new baby Christians? That's like me going around saying, "I hate babies! I hate it when new babies are born! We should outlaw having new births in this country!" It's like saying, "I hate it when people find new life in Christ! I get sick of seeing God changing people. I don't like it when Christ gets a hold of someone and makes that person more unselfish, more kind, more honest, more loving! But this is the kind of good stuff that happens when people are converted, or truly born again!

One of the misunderstandings is that people think only really bad people need to be born again! Someone pipes up, "Well, I can understand drug dealers, liars and cheats, people who uses filthy language - these kinds of people need to be converted, but not nice, decent people who smell good and go to church." But Jesus said *all of us* all need a spiritual transformation: "you must be born again", He taught. Keep in mind that Nicodemus was a good man, a Jewish religious leader, well educated, he believed in God and that Jesus came from God - yet Jesus said he needed to be born again! Decent, law-abiding persons can be just as far from God as the person in jail or the town drunk. Actually, I never did anything bad that made headlines; I was a pretty good kid; but I needed to be born again.

Our United Methodist heritage has affirmed the Biblical teaching about conversion and the new birth. In the EUB Confession of Faith, Article 19, it refers to this: "We believe regeneration (new birth) is the renewal of man in righteousness through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, whereby we are made partakers of the divine nature and experience newness of life. By this new birth the believer becomes reconciled to God and is enabled to serve him with the will and the affection."

In the United Methodist Discipline (the guide book for our denomination), in the section dealing with our heritage, theology, beliefs, we find these words: "*Wesleyan theology stresses that a decisive change in the human heart can and does occur under the prompting of grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.... "in justification we are, through faith, forgiven our sin and restored to God's favor. This righting of relationships by God through Christ calls forth our faith and trust as we experience regeneration, by which we are made new creatures in Christ.... "This process of justification and new birth is often referred to as conversion. Such a change may be sudden and dramatic, or gradual and cumulative."*

The last sentence above highlights a very important point. The experience of being born again can be sudden and dramatic, with a lot of emotion. But it can also be gradual, like a flower opening up to the sun. My own conversion was like this: a slow, developing process. But whether it's a sudden, emotional, spectacular type conversion, or a slow and gradual opening up of our life to Christ, *each experience of the new birth is still a miracle* - how Jesus can change lives!

Real Christian faith is a religion not just of the head but of the heart! John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, had an experience of Christ on Aldersgate Street in London of which he said, "I felt my heart strangely warmed...". That experience changed this man, and set him on fire for God!

Genuine Christianity is not just a religion of the head, but a religion of the heart - where we experience the transforming power of Christ in our life and heart. We *can* start life all over again...we *can* be born again!

There is a man by the name of Percy Campbell. By the age of 14, Percy had racked up 39 felonies on his criminal record. News reporters dubbed him, "Crime Boy", and a *Miami Herald* article labeled him "the ultimate lost cause." His crimes finally landed him in an adult court, where he was sentenced to a term at the Last Chance Ranch, a program for the worst juvenile offenders. The Ranch's curriculum focuses on hard work, discipline, and character-building. In 2 years at the Ranch, Percy became a champion bodybuilder. He went from a second-grade to a seventh-grade level of education. He also became a disciplined, conscientious young man. To symbolize his commitment to a new life, Percy decided to have a funeral for his old self. In a corner of the Ranch, he planted a cross with the words, "Crime Boy, R.I.P. Born 1980. Died 1997." It's a reminder to him that the old life is over, and he has a bright new life ahead of him. *We can start over again!*

Early in my ministry I served a church in the coal regions of Pennsylvania. I was in theological seminary. I was in my mid-twenties, still single. There was a family in the church who took me under their wings - a young couple with 3 young children. Often they invited me for a meal. Both of them, Joan and Pepper Kimmel, had recently come to Christ. They were having serious marital problems. One night Pepper went to a church service, and responded to an altar call. He said to the preacher, "I need the Lord." That night he gave his life to Christ. Later, his wife Joan did the same. Their lives were transformed by the power of Christ!

I had lost touch over the years. One day I got a phone call. Their youngest daughter had somehow tracked me down. She had bad news: her mother had just died. She invited me to the funeral. She told me how her mom had planned the service. Her greatest desire was to see people come to Christ. There would be an altar call.

Well, I was so glad to hear that over the years Joan had kept her faith! I re-arranged some things in my schedule so I could attend the funeral service. I wanted to go and pay tribute to this lady

and family who had done so much for me. The service was beautiful, a moving celebration of her life and faith. One of her children spoke, and said how her mother was not ashamed to talk about Christ to anyone. The gospel was presented that day, and people were invited to give their lives to the Lord.

One of the thrilling components of our United Methodist tradition has been our recognition that faith is not just having the right beliefs in our head, but being able to experience God in a way that transforms how we live!

One of my favorite people was a Methodist bishop named Gerald Kennedy. Among his many writings was a little book called *The Marks of a Methodist*. He has a chapter in this book titled “Experience” and a section in that chapter where he talks about conversion. Bishop Kennedy refers to John Wesley and the early Methodists: “Now Wesley and the early Methodists believed in conversion and were attacked for their belief by prominent churchmen. They were accused of saying that they had experienced miraculous conversions, and Wesley asked...what other kind of conversion there was...”

Then Bishop Kennedy spoke of our present time: “I went across my Area a few years ago to hold a series of evangelistic meetings. I made the strange and disturbing discovery that we have lost the mood of it. We no longer know how to set up a meeting in which people might get converted. The choirs sing anthems, the offertory is played, the responsive reading is read, the hymns are sung, but the main thing is missing. There is no room for something unplanned entering into the sanctuary and shaking (people’s) lives. It is all under control – *our* control.

“One of the main questions facing us today is whether formal churches can find room for the Spirit to move in the hearts of the congregation...if not, then we must confess that in the main part, we are no longer Methodists and we have lost our distinguishing sign...”

“(People) may be more sophisticated today, or think they are, but this generation is as much in need of being converted as any in history. It is the same Gospel and our faith is in the same God. What a day for The Methodist Church if we could but find the point again.”

Folks, those words were written quite a number of years ago, but I believe they are just as pertinent for us today as when he first wrote them!

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