

Study 15: The Holy Spirit in Conversion

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After looking at the conversions of the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul, and Cornelius, it is timely to review these last three chapters, and to specifically look at the role that the Holy Spirit played in each of these conversions.

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Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *How does the Holy Spirit act today to bring us to Christ?*
- *Why do you think that there is confusion about the Holy Spirit in the religious world?*

Read chapter 11 in preparation for next week. Why is the same story from chapter 10 repeated here?

Notes for study 15: The Holy Spirit in conversions

Introduction

After looking at the conversions of the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul, and Cornelius, it is timely to review these last three chapters, and to specifically look at the role that the Holy Spirit played in each of these conversions.

As we look at each of these, we will see some quite common themes. These will contrast with some commonly held views of the action of the Holy Spirit in conversion, and should cause us to challenge our thinking, as we “*get back to the bible*” for the answers.

Body of the Study

Throughout this study I will refer to the action of the Holy Spirit in the process of conversion. The purist may argue that this is not strictly correct, since in the conversion of Saul, it was Jesus who appeared both to him on the road, and to Ananias. In the case of Cornelius, it was “a voice from heaven” that came to Peter, and it was an angel that appeared to Cornelius. In the case of the Eunuch, it was an angel that spoke to Philip. Yet it was God working through agencies in each case. We can think of the three aspects of the Godhead as God the Father, Jesus the Mediator, and the Holy Spirit as the Intercessor. It is in the sense of the Holy Spirit as God’s intercessor that I am using the term in this study. If any has difficulty with this representation, then it does not change the thrust of the discussion to just think about the role of God in the process through whichever messenger is used in the specific instance.

The Calvinistic View of Salvation

John Calvin, a Frenchman who published his works around 1540, propagated a view of conversion which has become popularly held. His views have permeated and widely influenced many religious bodies. These views include the belief that we are all so totally encompassed in sin that we are unable to do anything about it, and we have to have God make the action directly on us before we can become amenable to the gospel. This is called *Total Depravity*, and whilst it is true that we need God to forgive us, we are going to see that man has a responsibility to do something about it, and it is not just up to relying on God. [This really requires a special series of studies, but it ought to be obvious that man needs to do something, for that is the very reason to preach the gospel to the lost.]

The conversion of Saul is often used as an example to support the Calvinist view of salvation, that Paul (and we) need to have this *road to Damascus experience* that *melts our heart*, and causes us to *totally submit ourselves to God*. When this happens, *we invite Jesus into our heart*, and He comes and dwells with us. The view says that it is only by such an experience that *we can know for sure* that *God really calls us* to be one of His children, and it is through such an experience that *we become christians by inviting Jesus into our hearts*. Then *we are baptised as an outward sign of the inward condition* that God has put us in. Without the action of the Holy Spirit, and God’s intervention in our lives through Him, we could not come to God, as we are so far away from Him because of our sins.

In this study, we will examine this view of conversion in the light of the three examples in Acts chapters 8, 9, and 10.

Part 1 – The conversion of Saul

We will start by looking at the conversion of Saul, because Saul is often the first place that people turn to, when considering the process of conversion, and the role of the Holy Spirit in particular.

What happened to Saul?

The short answer is that “*He saw the light*”, and “*He had a road to Damascus experience*”. Both of these expressions have come into our language from right back there in the first century. But *something* happened to Saul that caused him to change his life (or some would argue, that something happened to him that changed his life for him).

As we study through these three examples of conversion, we will find that the above description **IS NOT** what happened in any of the cases. There was in fact a common action of the Holy Spirit in bringing all three men into a relationship with God as christians (although they are yet to be so called).

The account of Saul’s conversion appears in three chapters in Acts. The first is in chapter 9, where Luke enters the account in the chronological position in his record of the early church, and tells it from the “third person” perspective. The second and third accounts are in chapters 22 and 26, where Paul tells the story from his own position to the crowd at Jerusalem, and to King Agrippa respectively.

Why did Jesus appear to Saul?

The Calvinistic view is that the appearance was to melt the heart of Saul. However Jesus tells Saul exactly why He appeared to him: (26:16) “...*I have appeared to you (for this purpose NKJV) to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you...*” (NIV).

Jesus’ appearance to Saul was specifically to qualify him as an apostle. Paul appeals to the appearance on several occasions when his apostleship was challenged (eg 1 Cor 9:9). It could be possible that Saul would never have changed his torturous attack on the church without such an appearance, although from what we know of Paul, he would probably have been convinced had he seen some of the miracles that were performed by the apostles (c/f Mk 16:20, Acts 8:6). Bear in mind that he had a good conscience, believing that he was doing the work of God – believing that this “new sect” was committing blasphemy (Acts 23:1; 22:3; 26:9-10). Whist the demonstration of such miracles may have resulted in his conversion, it would not have qualified him as an apostle.

What did Saul have to do to become a christian?

When the Lord appeared to Saul, he told him to “...*go into Damascus, and there you will be told what to do...*” (9:6). A pertinent question is: Why didn’t Jesus just tell him what he needed to do? Or, why didn’t Jesus say “*Your sins are forgiven, now go and serve me*”?

Saul spent three days in prayer without eating or drinking. He realised that he was actually doing wrong when he thought he was doing good for God. He was sorry for what he had done, and understood the (eternal) consequences. This is not the picture of a man who has just had his sins forgiven – the one who has just become a christian!

Jesus told Saul that he would be told what to do in Damascus, and it is there that Ananias teaches him. When Ananias came to him, he said “...*arise and be baptised and wash away your sins...*” (22:16). Notice that Ananias tells him the reason that he needs to be baptised is to “*wash away his sins*”. It was not as an outward sign of what had happened to him, nor was it to wash away the dirt from his skin (1Pet 3:21). It was the demonstration of his obedience to God. When he obeyed God (in baptism), it was then that God took his sins away as he was *washed in the blood of the lamb*.

What was the action of the Holy Spirit?

Saul needed to hear and obey the gospel. He was a zealous man whose heart was right towards God, but he had wrong information. On the road, Saul gained the knowledge and became absolutely convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He then had faith (belief) in Jesus as God’s son. He needed to repent from the wrong actions (even although he thought they were right – they were in fact wrong).

The action of the Holy Spirit was to bring the man who needed to obey the gospel, into contact with the man who was going to preach the gospel to him. In this case, The Holy Spirit worked on both Saul and on Ananias to bring them together.

Saul's conversion happened by his hearing what God had to say, and obeying God when he submitted to Him in baptism – exactly as it does for everyone else.

Part 2 – The conversion of the Eunuch

The Eunuch was a devout religious man, who wanted to know more about God. But he did not understand that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

The Holy Spirit (perhaps in the form of an angel) could have appeared to the Eunuch, and explained what was required of him. Or, he could have appeared to the Eunuch in a vision, revealed Jesus as the Messiah, and told him what to do. But that is not what happened.

What did the Eunuch have to do to become a christian?

The Eunuch wanted to know more about God, and needed someone to explain things to him. Philip came along, and preached to him, explaining that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Philip told him what he needed to do – if he believes in Jesus as the Messiah, he could be baptised (8:37 NKJV).

Both Philip and the Eunuch went down into the water, and Philip baptised him into Christ.

What was the action of the Holy Spirit?

The action of the Holy Spirit was to bring the man who was ready and needed to obey the gospel, into contact with the man who was going to preach the gospel to him. In this case, The Holy Spirit worked on Philip to bring them together.

The Eunuch's conversion happened by his hearing what God had to say, and obeying God when he submitted to God in baptism – exactly as it did for Saul, and exactly as it does for everyone else.

Part 3 – The conversion of the Cornelius

What happened to Cornelius?

Cornelius was a devout and God fearing man (as we noted in study 14). Like Saul and the Eunuch, he needed to understand that Jesus was the promised Messiah. An angel appeared to Cornelius, and he was left under absolutely no doubt that he had received a message from God.

The Calvinistic view of conversion would lead some to look at this appearance and say without a doubt that he had become a christian when he received that revelation from God. (Or to be more explicit, that if such a devout religious person today was not already accepted as a christian, then receiving such a revelation from God would remove all doubt!). Finally, after receiving the Holy Spirit, those people would say that such an event removed all possible doubt.

However, we need to notice what happened to Cornelius, and what he was told to do.

What was Cornelius told to do?

Cornelius was told to "...send men to Joppa (Go fetch Peter!), and he will tell you what you must do..." (10:5-6).

As Peter recounted the story to the apostles at Jerusalem, he described how the angel had told Cornelius that Peter would "...tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved..." (11:14 NKJV)

So, why didn't the angel just tell Peter what he needed to do? Why didn't the angel just tell him that God had forgiven his sins, and that if he *invited Jesus into his heart*, that he would be made right with God?

What was the action of the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit played a special part in the conversion of Cornelius – in that he received the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit. We will consider this a little later in this study. But we want to notice that the Holy Spirit played an identical work in the conversion of Cornelius as He had in the two previous accounts that we have considered.

The Holy Spirit brought the man who needed to obey the gospel, into contact with the man who was going to preach the gospel to him. In this case, The Holy Spirit worked on Cornelius to have him send for Peter, and also on Peter so that he would go into the house of a Gentile without doubting about what he was doing.

The final action of the Holy Spirit in baptising Cornelius and his household (the baptismal measure of the Holy Spirit) removed absolutely all doubt that Peter (or the other brethren who had come from Joppa) might have about the conversion of Gentiles.

The conversion of Cornelius showed that the gospel was for the Gentiles in exactly the same way as it was for the Jews. This was evidenced by the Holy Spirit falling on Cornelius in exactly the same way as it had on the apostles on the day of Pentecost (11:15), and provided absolute proof of the conclusion.

Conclusions and Summary

As we look at all three of these cases, we find some quite common themes.

Firstly, the action of the Holy Spirit. In all three cases, He acted to bring the preacher and the convert together. Regardless of whether it was the convert who needed to be brought to the preacher (as in the case of Saul), or the preacher who needed to be brought to the convert (as in the case of the Eunuch), or both needed to be brought together (as in the case of Cornelius), the action was the same.

Secondly, in all three cases, the preacher preached to gospel to the convert. For Cornelius, it was the “*...words by which you ... will be saved...*” (11:14). For Paul, it was “*...go into the city, and you will be told what you must do...*” (9:6), and then Ananias preached to him (22:14-15). For the Eunuch it was Philip who “*...opened his mouth, and beginning at the same scripture, preached Jesus to him...*” (8:35 NKJV). This is exactly consistent with every other account of conversion that we find in the book of Acts, and exactly what Paul said to the church at Corinth “*...it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe...*” (1 Cor 1:21 KJV).

Further, in his letter to the Romans, Paul says:

“*...How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"...*” (Rom 10:14-15 NIV)

God's plan is that we are saved by hearing the message of the gospel that is preached; believing in Jesus as the Son of God and the promised Messiah; repenting of our sins and the wrong things that we have done in our lives; and obeying the gospel by being baptised into Christ.

The repentance of the converts is obvious by his actions in the case of Saul, but in the other two cases, it is implied since they are trying to put their lives right with God. In all three cases their faith is also obvious, and certainly stated in the case of the Eunuch (at least in the received text, although vs 37 is omitted from some translations such as the NIV).

Thirdly, in all cases their baptism is a common theme. In the case of Saul, he was told to “*...arise and be baptised and wash away your sins...*” (22:16). In the case of the Eunuch, it followed on exactly behind the preaching of the gospel. Philip’s preaching “*...began at the same scripture and he preached unto him Jesus...*” (8:35). As a result of this preaching, the Eunuch asked “*...what is stopping me from being baptised?...*” (8:36). (His baptism = immersion, was in water (8:36, 38, 39)). In the case of Cornelius, Peter commanded them to be baptised in water (10:47-48).

The patterns that we observe are *EXACTLY* the same as those observed on the day of Pentecost, and in every other case of conversion. They did not need the Holy Spirit to *melt their heart*, but rather they needed to hear the gospel and obey it. The Holy Spirit acted to bring the convert in contact with the preacher. Whilst the miraculous way in which this happened in the book of Acts may not continue today, God will providentially lead those who are truly seeking to obey Him, to those who can teach them the way:

“*... "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened..."* (Mt 7:7-8 NIV).

May we listen to what He has to say to us through His word, and “*...obey from the heart that form of doctrine that was delivered unto us...*” (Rom 6:17).

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