

Onesimus: A Sketch Of Conversion

The most marvelous topic in all Scripture is eternal in scope and centuries in practice. It is the topic of “conversion”!

Of all possible definitions of “conversion,” perhaps the following will provide the best understanding.

Conversion is no repairing of the old building; but it takes all down, and erects a new structure. It is not the putting on of a patch, or sewing on a list of holiness; but, with the true convert, holiness is woven into all his powers, principles, and practices. The sincere Christian is quite a new fabric—from the foundation to the top, all new! He is a new man, a new creature. All things have become new. Conversion is a deep work, a heart work; it turns all upside down, and makes a man be in a new world. It goes throughout the mind, throughout the members, throughout the motions of the whole life.

(Author Unknown)

Spanning the existence and civilization of mortals, the constant desire of Almighty God was to provide a way so many could enjoy personal peace and happiness (Ephesians 1:4-7). This divine goal can only be accomplished through the conversion of the soul. No insight into the character of God is more revealing than the Almighty’s desire for the conversion of His creation.

The runaway slave, Onesimus, provides us with an excellent lesson on this marvelous topic. In this vagabond, Phrygian slave we are able to see a sketch of biblical conversion that is plain and simple.

CONVERSION SOUGHT

The whole of Scripture is devoted to unfolding the divine drama of conversion. From the beginning, God desired companionship with the souls He had created (Ephesians 1:4-7). In the beauty of Eden’s bliss, the purity of fellowship between God divine and mortal man was enjoyed. It must have often been the case that “in the cool of the day” God and man would walk and talk, enjoying the blessings of fellowship. But that pure bliss was too quickly lost to sin’s ransom. Because of sin, man and God were prevented the joys of fellowship (Isaiah 59:2). The joys shared in “the cool of the day” seemed forever gone.

But God did not give up on man. Throughout man’s history God sought to reveal His desire to restore the lost fellowship. He prepared the means for man’s conversion and began a program by which fellowship could be restored.

A survey of Scriptures impresses the student with God’s earnest desire to convert erring man. The prophets spoke of this conversion, “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16, 17; cf. Isaiah 42:16; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 18:23, 31; 36:26, 27; etc.). The “Forerunner” boldly announced the conversion that was spoken of by the prophets and sought by God (Matthew 3:1-12). This conversion involved God offering His only begotten Son as an atonement for man’s sins (John 3:16; Hebrews 9:11-14). The Son

of God came to earth and revealed for all to see the divine compassion and the divine desire for conversion (Luke 14:23). All of the prophets' words focused upon Calvary. John the Immerser's bold rebukes looked toward Calvary. God's compassion was revealed at Golgotha. It was the dark day of Calvary that provided the means by which God's desires of conversion were achieved (Hebrews 9:11, 12; 2 Corinthians 5:15, 19).

These facts are crystal clear. God *sought* a way for man to be converted. God was neither obligated nor forced to do so. He had created all things "good," and man had "botched" the beauty of creation. God could have easily "washed His hands" of the whole mess—the frustrations of being patient with mortals dedicated to serving self; the exasperation of constantly repeating basic commands; the experience of a deep pain caused by the heartbreak of an unrequited love. God did not have to seek the conversion of erring man—but He did! This reveals the beauty of John 3:16. The simple truth is that *God sought* man's reconciliation!

CONVERSION SIGHTED

Onesimus provides an excellent look at the conversion which God has so graciously provided mankind. *Here was a man picturing the depths of degradation*—a fleeing slave whose wanderings had brought him to Rome's vile streets. He had sacrificed his position as Philemon's slave and found himself in the lowest gutter of human existence. *Here was a man picturing hopelessness*—what lay ahead for him? He had chosen for himself a path that led only to greater trouble and turmoil. He had no inner peace, no haven of shelter, and no lasting hope (Ephesians 2:12).

But the life of Onesimus took a dramatic change. Stated in simple terms, Onesimus was converted! (Philemon 10). When this transpired all things changed for him (Isaiah 42:16; Jeremiah 33:6). The one who had fled to the Imperial City to escape his past had found no escape! He who had left in prospect of promise had found nothing of substance! In the teeming masses of Rome, Onesimus was all alone. Life was dark and hopeless until he heard the gospel preached by Paul.

What message would Paul have spoken to motivate the slave to be "begotten" by the gospel? Perhaps it was a message like that found in Ephesians 2 which was written during the time when

Paul met Onesimus. Ephesians 2 is a great message to all who are struggling with the hopelessness of sin. The chapter discusses the unbelievable "Good News" (Ephesians 2:1-10). This "Good News" proclaims that God's grace is available to all who are willing to demonstrate an obedient faith. The chapter discusses the great love of God (Ephesians 2:11-18). God's great love is broad enough to cover all men. Whoever responds and is converted by the gospel is able to share in the great love of Almighty God. This chapter shows that the converted become significant (Ephesians 2:19-22). Those who are willing to obey the gospel are important; they have great value! "So then you are no longer. . . ." is a wonderful blessing found only in conversion!

The glorious message of conversion, summarized in Ephesians 2, would have been eagerly received by Onesimus. What did he think when he heard the glorious "Good News"? If he had asked, "How can I possibly share in this great salvation?" what would Paul have replied? Probably, he would have brought focus upon the phrase "in Christ" (v. 13). It is "in Christ" that all spiritual blessings are found (Ephesians 1:3). Salvation, reconciliation with God, is certainly among the "spiritual blessings" found "in Christ." Also, the phrase "in Christ" distinguishes between the "before" and the "after" of conversion. Until one is "in Christ," he is not converted. It is not hard to understand that Paul would have told Onesimus, "If you want to enjoy the wonderful blessings of salvation, you must get 'into Christ.'" How would Onesimus have accomplished this transition? Before conversion he was "out of Christ," and after conversion he would be "in Christ." This transition is the crux of conversion!

In order to make that transition Onesimus would have done several things. He would have *heard* the glorious gospel message. He would have *believed* that gospel message. He would have demonstrated a desire to follow God's will in his life (elsewhere referred to as *repentance*; Luke 13:3). And he would have been *baptized* for the remission of sins. It is this last step (baptism) that culminates the conversion process. At baptism one confesses faith in Christ, having heard and understood the gospel (Acts 8:37). At baptism one is baptized "into Christ" (Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:4). At baptism one is "washed" from sin (Acts 22:16). And at baptism one is "born" again and thus becomes a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17; John 3:5).

Onesimus provides an excellent look at how conversion takes place in a person's life. Because of his obedience, all things changed, and life for him turned from hopeless to hope-filled!

CONVERSION SUMMARIZED

Onesimus reveals, to sincere searchers, the basic facts about biblical conversion. The following four characteristics ought to be studied so that all can evaluate their conversion to God.

Transforming

Onesimus was transformed into a "brother" in Christ and became an earnest helper to Paul (vv. 11, 13). He was transformed into God's son. Now Onesimus could join with Paul and confidently claim that "God is *our* Father." Onesimus' entire life dramatically changed! He was transformed at conversion. Anyone today who professes that salvation does not demonstrate a similar transformation is deceived about their conversion! The first point about conversion is that it causes drastic changes! (Ephesians 5:7-11).

Sincere

Onesimus was willing to go back and face the unknown reaction of Philemon. The runaway slave could expect anything from a torturous death to complete forgiveness. He was willing to return because it was the right thing to do following his conversion (cf. Luke 19:8; Ezekiel 33:14-16). Sincerity was shown in his desire of restitution. Anyone who fails to offer restitution cannot share the same conversion as Onesimus! (Philippians 1:10, 11).

Sudden

How long did it take Onesimus to know Paul? We do not know. How long did it take for Onesimus to respond to the gospel after hearing and understanding it? We do not know. But we can be sure that it did not take too long. Paul's imprisonment is usually thought to have lasted no longer than two years. It seems that Onesimus was converted soon after Paul reached Rome. How long would it take for a runaway slave, one who was without any hope or any peace and without God, to seize all three when they were offered?

An Indian and a white man, at worship together, were both stirred to obey the gospel. The Indian began immediately to rejoice in God's par-

don. The white man, for a long time, was under distress of mind and at times ready to despair. He finally came to understand the forgiveness of God. He later met his red brother in Christ and asked, "How is it that I struggled so long with accepting the fact that all sins were washed away, and you found comfort so soon?" The Indian replied, "Sup-

*Christ's power in
the gospel is able to change hard
hearts and stubborn minds
in even the stoutest rebels
and bring them to serve
God with an un-
selfish devotion.*

pose that there comes along a rich prince. He wants to give you a new coat. You look at your coat and say, 'My coat looks pretty good. I think I'll wear it a little longer.' He then offers me a new coat. I look at my old blanket and quickly throw it away to accept the beautiful garment. In the same way, brother, you tried to cover up your sins and tried to find a solution by yourself. But I, a poor Indian, could not do that. Therefore, I gladly accepted the forgiveness of God and trusted in His Word for my salvation." Anyone who is aware of his soul's need should stop trying to ignore his true condition and stop trying to fashion his own salvation. He should follow the example of Onesimus and suddenly obey God (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Powerful

Imagine the reaction of the old friends of Onesimus when they heard about his conversion! "Why him!? Who would have ever imagined that thief and rogue would ever be saved!" The genuine beauty of conversion is its surprise—those you would never have dreamed of obey the gospel and are completely transformed! It is an amazing transition. Jesus Christ has the power to change lives (Romans 1:16, 17). How sad that some question the gospel's power and sit as the Pharisees, thinking some are beyond help (Luke 15:1, 2). Onesimus shows us that it is

possible to convert even the most stubborn sinner. Christ's power in the gospel is able to change hard hearts and stubborn minds in even the stoutest rebels and bring them to serve God with an unselfish devotion. Let us carefully guard against the rejection of this power! (Acts 26:15).

CONCLUSION

The definition of "conversion" is generally misunderstood. An old soldier once said, "When I was a young fellow in the army, we used to receive a command, 'About face!' When I became a soldier of the cross, this is the same command that my Captain gave. He called me to 'About face!' from where I was before, and I love to obey that command." In a general way, one can safely say that conversion is an "About face!" But biblical conversion involves some specifics which must be understood if the total transition is to occur. The specifics of conversion are illustrated well by Onesimus. In order to be truly converted, one must hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, and by obedient faith he must be baptized into Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Following baptism one must allow God's Word to transform every aspect of daily life into actions that will bring glory to the Almighty's name.

Do not delay in obeying the gospel of God. Become a child of God, and begin to transform your life according to His will that is revealed in the Bible! (Colossians 3:10).

—John Kachelman

"Uselessness"
Becoming *"Useful"*
(*Philemon 11*)

The name "Onesimus" literally means "profitable." The true value of this man was not realized until he became a Christian. By examining this play on words we discover a most profitable lesson.

1. "Uselessness" is a character trait of those without Christ.
 - a. Responsibility and duty are shrugged off and rejected—he ran away (v. 12).
 - b. Relationships are maintained due to the wrong perspective and for a brief time (v. 15).

- c. Regard for others is missing—one constantly "wrongs" another (v. 18).
2. "Useful" characterizes one who obeys God's will in genuine conversion.
 - a. Responsibilities in all areas of life are accepted (v. 11).
 - b. Relationships deepen because of affection (vv. 12, 15, 16).
 - c. Regard for others prompts devotion to preaching the gospel (v. 13).
 - d. Respect for Christ's church will enable the once "useless" to be fully accepted (v. 17).

*"I Am Sending
Him Back"*
(*Philemon 12*)

Paul knew it was necessary for the runaway slave to return his master.

1. This was necessary because:
 - a. It was *the responsible thing* to do. Following Christ means we must act responsibly.
 - b. It was *the moral thing* to do. Following Christ demands that we make restitution of all within our power.
 - c. It was *the right thing* to do. In order for the discord of ill-will to be satisfied, the two men had to get back together.
2. He sent him back far different than he had left.
 - a. He left "useless" but returned "useful."
 - b. He left a sinner but returned a saint.
 - c. He left a "slave" but returned a "dear brother."

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1. His degradation reflects the utter hopelessness of man.
 2. His regeneration reveals the eternal hope of all.
 3. His spiritual service—grateful love.
 4. His spiritual transformation into the doer of right at highest personal costs.
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