

Ananias and Paul on CONVERSION

During my formative years and earlier years of preaching, my people in the churches of Christ were much more aggressive in evangelism. This zeal was fired more fervently by our conviction that we had restored the true route to salvation which others had abandoned.

Many of our lessons were based on the accounts of conversion recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles* which we sometimes described as the *book of conversions*. In strengthening our case, we analyzed each account, pointed to their parallel messages, and charted them all for comparison to show that the same thing was required of each convert.

While it is very questionable that Luke's record in Acts was purposely to show the route to God's forgiveness for us to use in evangelistic sermons, it remains that what he recorded was true. Though he was not teaching us lessons on how to find salvation, he told Theophilus in his historical narratives how different persons obtained that forgiveness. His details are in harmony with the Great Commission in which Jesus offered the benefit of his atonement to every creature (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; compare Luke 24:44-49).

Many times I used the exciting story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus as illustrative of how a sinner receives salvation. The points gained from such a study are still valid. What greater authenticity could we look for? Here is a direct intervention by Jesus, the giving of the Holy Spirit, the divine direction of Ananias, and the witness of the inspired apostle himself narrated toward the close of his ministry about a quarter of a century later. So please look again with me at this part of God's revelation. There are unsettling points for our confused religious community along with confirming assurances to be gained.

Some of this treatise will be negative in an effort to clear away much rank growth of theological interpretations which tend to hide the colorful, fragrant flower of truth.

Various details of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus related in Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-21; 26:1-23 are reviewed briefly here. Saul, like a mythical, fire-breathing monster, was "still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." He was on his way to Damascus to arrest disciples and to bring them back to Jerusalem bound. As he approached Damascus, there came a blinding light exceeding the brightness of the noonday sun. He fell to the ground and heard an arresting call, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me. You are like kicking against an ox goad hurting yourself." "Who are you, Lord? What will you have me do?" The answer must have been an emotional thunderbolt! "I am Jesus! Go into the city and it will be told you what to do," the Voice replied.

This blinded, devastated conqueror was led by hand into Damascus where he prayed in deep contrition for three days without eating or drinking. The Lord then sent Ananias, a disciple living in Damascus, to Saul. Fearful of this notorious persecutor, Ananias was reluctant, but the Lord assured him that Saul had been chosen to carry his name before the Gentiles and kings and Israel. Then going to Saul and laying his hands on him, Ananias explained, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." After regaining his sight, Saul was urged, "And now why do you wait?"

Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” “Then he rose and was baptized, and took food and was strengthened.”

Your full reading of these references is encouraged as we now make some observations about them and relate them to present-day teachings about receiving the grace of God through Christ.

Ineffective Formulas

Paul, addressing the Jewish council many years later, declared, “Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day” (23:1). No person should allow himself or herself to be condemned by violation of conscience, yet living with a clear conscience as Paul had done cannot save, for it would be a merited salvation. A person can be conscientious, God-fearing, and zealous while alienated from God. Looking back later, he would see himself as the chief of sinners at that time.

Those who rely upon a “saving experience” have been known to declare that Saul was saved “before he hit the ground.” We have to look outside the Scriptures, however, to find mention of the popular concept of a saving experience. Emotional reactions are not evidences of forgiveness. Forgiveness is in the mind of God and is not felt in the mind of one forgiven. For example, while you read this you might forgive me of some offense but I would not feel it.

When Ananias, who received his instructions directly, came to Saul, he did not say, “Good brother, Jesus has appeared to you, so we can be sure you are saved!” If the appearance of Jesus did not save that sinner, what trust can we have in any sort of mystical experience or feeling today?

Neither did Ananias, after laying hands on him, declare, “Saul, you have received the Holy Spirit. You, the former enemy of Jesus and his disciples, no longer are burdened by those sins. You are forgiven!” This point is just as true as if the whole world believed it: There is no record of the Spirit saving anyone by a direct operation on the person; there is no record of the Spirit ever even telling anyone directly what to do to be saved. Jesus announced in the Great Commission and confirmed on Pentecost how a sinner might receive salvation, and there is no indication that he varied from that in specific cases. The Holy Spirit guided us into all truth, but the Holy Spirit is not our savior. More about his work later.

Ananias did not assure Saul that Jesus had already saved him because “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, your will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). Certainly, Saul had become a believer when Jesus appeared to him on the road, and he had expressed his submissive faith in contrition by asking Jesus what he wanted him to do. But he was not yet free from the guilt of his sins!

When the stricken, undone Saul, called out from the ground, “Lord, what shall I do,” Jesus did not soothe him with, “Saul, there is nothing for you to do. I have already done it all for you. You have nothing to answer for.” Jesus gave him instructions to follow and said that in the city more instructions would be given.

Ananias told Saul, “Just believe in Jesus and pray the sinner’s prayer,” didn’t he? Those who give that advice today know that Ananias did not give it to Saul. If he had, Saul might have rightly responded, “What do you think I have been doing the last three days and nights?” But it says, right there in Romans 10:13, “For **every one** who **calls on**

the name of the Lord will be saved.” So what else could be asked of Saul? His sins were already remitted. Really? Who says so, modern pulpiteers or the inspired writers?

With these various experiences in Saul’s favor in which seekers tend to trust for salvation or as evidence of having been forgiven, he still had not received that assurance. If he was saved instantaneously, he did not realize it for he inquired as to what to do and then followed the instructions given. If he was saved then, Jesus did not know it for he sent Ananias to him to tell him how to be rid of his sins. If he was saved before he hit the ground, the Spirit was not aware of it for he directed Ananias to inform him. Likewise, Ananias was not informed of it because, after those happenings and his explanation of why they happened, he urged Saul, “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” His sins still had not been remitted!

Sins Washed Away

There is no indication that Saul hesitated, questioning whether sin is something that can be washed from the body in water. He was familiar with the rituals of cleansing required by the Law of Moses in which he was schooled. He could understand the washing of baptism to be a ceremony of purification and that God accepted such an approved expression of faith inasmuch as it was impossible for a person to remit his own transgressions. The trust was in the grace of God rather than an efficacious or sacramental ritual. In later times Paul never explained that Ananias was too simplistic and misled in directing him to wash away his sins in baptism. Paul’s epistles to the Romans and Galatians, written about twenty-five years after his conversion, in which he commented on baptism, justification by faith, confession, and calling on the name of the Lord were in complete harmony with the narrative of his conversion.

Saul’s obedience was under the direct guidance and supervision of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and a Spirit-led disciple. It was in harmony with Jesus’ Great Commission to every creature and what Jesus had told Nicodemus in veiled language about a birth of water and the Spirit. It was in harmony with the other narratives of conversions in *Acts*. It is questioned only by modern theologians!

Saul of Tarsus, thereafter known as Paul, the apostle, became the evangelist to the Gentiles who wrote various epistles. In looking back in later years, did Paul ever denounce the place of baptism in the receiving of the grace of God in Christ? He did not. Instead he emphasized it as the time of finalizing our relationship with Christ.

In discussing the covenant of Law and the covenant of grace through faith, he taught that they were no longer children under a custodian of Law “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.” The next sentence explains how: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:26f). Paul included himself as one being “baptized into Christ” (Rom. 6:3). That change of relationship is not accomplished through faith without baptism.

When we are baptized into Christ, we are baptized into the one body, which is the church / *ekklesia* / the saved (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4; Col. 1:18). One cannot have fellowship with Christ, the source of all spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3), without being in his spiritual body which is the church (universal congregation, assembly of the forgiven).

Since baptism is a ritualistic acceptance of the remission of sins provided in Christ’s atonement (Acts 2:38; 22:16), we are forgiven / saved by the same process that creates our relationship in Christ in his saved group.

We were separated from God by our sins (Isa. 59:2). Paul says we are reconciled to God in our relationship in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18f). That reconciliation is in one body (Eph. 2:6) which is the church; hence, the reconciled are his church. The church does not save, but it is the saved, for the same procedure that saves us makes us his saved group. All these considerations identify baptism, not simply believing, as the point of change of relationship. Being thus reconciled to God, we are in fellowship with God and all others whom he has forgiven.

Paul further informs us that “if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). This newness of life (new birth; John 3:3-5) is given when one symbolically dies with Christ, is buried with him, and is raised from the dead with him in baptism (Rom. 6:3-4). In this rebirth of water and the Spirit one becomes a child of God entering and submitting to the Kingdom of God (See Gal. 3:26f again).

These references from Paul which should be studied in context, of course, were written long after his conversion experience which he himself related in Acts 22 and 26. In them he explains some deeper meanings without altering his story. Do we have reason to change it?

Grace Through Faith

About twenty-five years after his conversion he explained: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8f). By that statement was he saying that Ananias really *goofed* and misled him into thinking that he could gain salvation by works when he told him to be baptized to wash away his sins? Certainly not. Paul could know that he was formally accepting Christ’s forgiveness which changed his relationship rather than contributing anything to it. His obedience was no more meritorious than his faith. Neither faith nor baptism contributed anything to the atoning of sins but both are essential to the accepting of the atonement.

Justification is not delivered to us C.O.D.! We pay nothing for it, nor do we have anything of merit to offer. That does not mean, however, that we do not have to answer the postman’s ring or walk to the mailbox. We must accept the gift or it is “returned to the sender.” We may sign a receipt and use a pocket knife to open the gift. All these actions are necessary to receiving the benefit of the gift but offer nothing whatever toward payment for it. Paul did not class his actions of acceptance as works adding anything to the completed work of Christ.

All of Paul’s explanations about salvation by faith must be interpreted in harmony with his own conversion. Paul taught salvation by faith – a system of faith – rather than by law with its system of works. When he wrote of saving faith, he was referring to faith in its full essence which includes response. “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6) is a succinct statement of that. Not through rituals of the Law (code) of Moses, but through Christ’s law (principle of action -- love), saving faith includes response. Without the essential element of action, faith is dead, hence, ineffective. The active response of faith is not a work in the sense that Paul says we could have reason to boast.

Single Factors

We can find prooftexts that attribute salvation to various single factors such as faith, repentance, calling on the Lord, confession, baptism, works, and doing the will of

the Father. Are we left to choose the factor which appeals to us, fortifying it with prooftexts, while disregarding the others? No, for they are all involved in the system of faith. When a writer emphasizes a single factor, he is using a common linguistic device called a *metonymy*. In the metonymy one part may be used for the whole. For illustration, if you say your life was saved by the quick response of the paramedics, you are including all their remedial activities. Jesus explained that his Golden Rule “is the law and the prophets” in letting a part represent the whole. Also, in the beloved Golden Text of the Bible, John 3:16, when Jesus specified “whoever believes.” He was including all the responsive action that is involved in living faith. Surely, he was not referring to dead faith – faith without works (James 2:18-26). Even so, inspired writers may attribute our righteousness to the single or few factors being discussed as in Romans 10. Paul uses this device in answering the jailer’s cry, “Men, what must I do to be saved?” with “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household,” yet Paul then taught them the more inclusive word of the Lord and baptized them the same hour of the night. (Acts 16:30f).

It is a marvel to me that students of the Word will quote Paul in declaring, “Everyone who **calls** upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13) without relating it to Acts 22:16 where Saul was told, “Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, **calling on his name**.” In his epistle in later years Paul is not indicating that he was freed from his guilt on the Damascus road when he called out to the Lord nor at any other time simply by calling out in something akin to “the sinner’s prayer.” The “calling on his name” is inclusive of his whole conversion process.

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not what I tell you?” Jesus chided (Lk. 6:46). Again, “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). To call upon the name of the Lord involves more than crying out to him in prayer.

What, then, does it mean to call on his name? The *name* denotes, not some proper name like *Jesus*, but the *person or authority of that person*. To do something *in the name* of a person means to do it *by the authority of or in behalf of*. When Saul was baptized to wash away his sins, he was doing that *by the authority of* the Lord as he was directed to do through Ananias. In this procedure he was not only invoking the authority of Jesus but also the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Just before his ascension, “Jesus came and said to them, ‘All **authority** in heaven and on earth has been given to **me**. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the **name** of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age’” (Matt. 28:18-20).

These considerations interpret Paul’s “**every one who calls**” in relation to his own account of his conversion directed by Ananias. They are in harmony with Jesus’ Great Commission. There is harmony with the conversion of the first converts on Pentecost when Peter told that great gathering, “Whoever **calls** on the name of the Lord shall be saved,” and then instructed convicted men, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:21, 38).

Do we not compromise our integrity as interpreters when we dissociate Paul’s teaching from his own related conversion experience, the very words of Jesus, and the

words of Peter on Pentecost to whom Jesus had given the authoritative keys of the kingdom? So, in view of these considerations, what does it mean to call upon the name of the Lord? You are accountable to God for the answer you give sinners.

Holy Spirit

The visible manifestations of the baptism of the Holy Spirit as depicted in Acts were not for the purpose of saving individuals or showing how or when salvation is given. Let it be stated again: There is no record of the Holy Spirit filling the saving role or even telling an individual what to do to be saved. Luke was not explaining the full work of the Spirit that Jesus had promised. What, then, was Luke explaining?

Please consider this. The Roman Empire frowned upon new religions among its subjugated provinces while allowing free practice of their traditional national religions. Thus, Judaism was permitted. But here were the *Christianos* spreading from the Jews but with the disfavor of the Jews. They were becoming the target of persecution. Luke was writing Theophilus, evidently a Roman official, not so much to convert him to Christ, but to assure him that Christianity was the true Judaism which was no longer just nationalistic but worldwide in its thrust. This was attested by the Holy Spirit being given to Jewish apostles. Then others, like the Samaritans who were sort of *Jewish cousins*, Cornelius who was a Roman, Saul who was to be an apostle to the Gentiles, and converts to the teachings of John the Baptist were attested as being in harmony with the Jewish apostles. Thus the Holy Spirit was demonstrating God's acceptance of individuals of different races and cultures in one body of disciples of Jesus. This would indicate that Christians were the true Israel and that Christianity was the national religion of God's approval through the Spirit. Such status should relieve them of persecution in their spread into the Roman Empire.

All converts since Pentecost had received the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit at the time of their baptism, but only a few received visible manifestations as proof to onlookers. The visible manifestation was given in those five instances mentioned above – to some before baptism in water and to some afterward – to indicate God's inclusion of them in the "all nations" scope of his kingdom. Those visible manifestations were neither the cause or result of their having received the benefit of Christ's atonement.

Purpose of Baptism

What we are setting forth is not *baptismal regeneration*, the receiving of life through a *sacramental* ritual whose powers cleanse the soul. Such a sacramental concept was invented to be performed upon the infant supposedly born in sin. Baptism is a responsive part of faith by which grace is accessed (Rom. 5:1f).

In baptism we symbolically die with Jesus, are buried with him in his tomb, and are raised to new life in him. Paul, included his own conversion experience in expressing this: "Do you not know that **all of us** who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? **We** were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, **we** too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3f).

Paul again includes himself in the consideration that "...he saved us, not because of **deeds done by us in righteousness**, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the **washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit**, which he poured out upon us richly

through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be **justified by his grace** and become heirs in hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5f; compare Heb. 10:22; 1 Cor. 6:11). He speaks of symbolic cleansing by washing again, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might **sanctify** her, having **cleansed** her by the **washing of water with the word**, etc.” (Eph. 5:25f).

Paul’s statements above relate well with the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born anew**, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is **born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3, 5).

From these passages we see that the **word**, **water**, and **Spirit** are involved in the **new birth**. Jesus told the disciples, “It is the **spirit** that gives life, the flesh is of no avail; the **words** that I have spoken to you are **spirit and life**” (John 6:63). Peter adds illumination with, “You have been **born anew**, not of perishable **seed** but of imperishable, through the living and abiding **word** of God”...”That **word** is the good news which was preached to you.” (1 Peter 1:23, 25).

Since inspired writers use natural birth as a type of the spiritual birth, let us look at the analogy. Life does not begin in the delivery room though it is ineffective without it. Our physical life comes from God through Adam and Eve and succeeding generations. Each individual new life begins with conception, an insemination (seeding). A developing period must be followed by a delivery, without which previous developments are in vain. The birth did not give the life but finalized it in a different relationship.

In similar manner the Spirit gives life through the word believed (seeding, insemination) which develops into active faith. Thus faith leads one to be baptized in finalizing the birth process. It is then that sins are remitted and the gift of the Holy Spirit is received. A new life is recognized and a new relationship is established.

Preach Jesus’ Words

It is with more dismay than joy that I compose this essay. After sixty years as a teacher of the word, I almost feel apologetic for still writing on such an elementary subject as baptism. Am I just singing the “Elijah blues”? Is everyone in the platoon out of step but me? It is my deep conviction that a truly fresh restudy should be made of this vital subject free from defenses of traditional, sectarian, or popular concepts. Perhaps the greatest good the Stone-Campbell Movement contributed to the American religious scene was its reevaluation of the conversion process, yet some of its fresh concepts became distorted and sectarian within the movement.

I find it inconceivable that present-day evangelists, in advising sinners as to how to accept the pardon Jesus has to offer to every creature, actually refuse to use the words of Jesus or Peter who proclaimed, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved,” and “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” The fact that evangelists prefer to substitute “just believe, accept Jesus in your heart, just pray the sinner’s prayer,” and other such terms for the very words of Jesus’ Great Commission should be shocking to every believer.

My conscience would never allow me to give assurance to a sinner that his freedom from sin is to be enjoyed without baptism. Baptism still remains as a commanded prerequisite to the remission of sins. There was always an urgency about it

in the narratives in Acts. After the finalizing of the new relationship in Christ by baptism, Saul took food and was refreshed, the Philippian jailer and his family rejoiced, and the Ethiopian treasurer went on his way rejoicing.

Are there exceptions? Does God save any unbaptized persons today? God's prerogatives are his own. If he chooses to save a non-believer or an unbaptized person, that is his prerogative. However, I am not authorized to encourage anyone to depend upon his possible exceptions instead of his instructions. Yes, Jesus forgave the thief on the cross, but he died before Jesus commanded baptism. His case was not an exception to the terms of the Great Commission for it had not been announced.

Having written all the above, now let me state that I am not trying to bind my conscience on you. I claim no infallibility. I am not your judge. I respect you according to the depth of your convictions. If you declare that you are a child of God, my only alternative or desire is to accept you as a brother or sister in Christ. I am saying, however, that a critical examination of our birth certificates is in order. []