

My Conversion Experience

Maybe I was just born to be the “poor soul” character, a sort of Rodney Dangerfield of the spiritual world, for I seem to have missed out on a lot of the euphoria that others claim in their religion. I have never had an exciting conversion experience like so many have claimed. Why has God not confirmed my salvation by some indescribable feeling? Am I still in the clutches of the evil one – I who have been a sort of kindergarten “teacher in Israel”?

There seems to be a common expectation among evangelical religionists of a “conversion experience.” It is almost a legal requirement for acceptance in some circles. Conversion has become not so much an acceptance of Christ through faith that expresses itself in obedience to the gospel as it is a subjective feeling. In my youth, it was referred to as a “better felt than told” experience. With hand over heart (in the chest) persons would declare, “I’d rather have what I feel right here than a whole stack of Bibles!”

Without any youthful rebellion against it, I was brought up in a very strict spiritual environment. Church attendance and participation were a way of life for our family. I never had any inclination toward youthful recklessness and excesses, if I may boast a bit. I did not lie, steal, curse, use vulgar language, make passes at the girls, fight, smoke, drink, or gamble (not even playing “keeps” with marbles). I sincerely wanted to do the right thing and, maybe especially, not do the wrong things.

I am not claiming that I attained perfection, for that is beyond our grasp. I came to realize through Bible teaching that I was at best a sinner unable to save myself. My hope of forgiveness was in Christ. I became aware of the need of repentance from my sins, of confessing faith in Christ as my savior, and of being baptized in accepting the salvation provided by Jesus’ atonement. So I complied with that in all sincerity when I was in my early teens about 65 years ago. I remember the relief I felt in having complied with what I understood to be the will of God. I could feel with the righteous Ethiopian eunuch who, after his baptism into Christ, went on his way rejoicing. Now, was that a “conversion experience?”

If I had believed that some other procedure, like memorizing the books of the Bible, was necessary for forgiveness, I am sure I would have had that same good feeling after having memorized them.

A spiritual conversion is a change involving repentance, a change of life brought by a change of mind. It is like going one direction, making a 180 degree turn, and going in the opposite direction. But I kept going

straight ahead! If I made any change, it was more like 360 degrees! The only difference that I recall was that I could then “take communion” and even help pass the trays! Was I converted?

Those affirming feelings of which many testify have come after decision to commit their lives to Christ which often included “praying through,” or in current times, praying “the sinner’s prayer” with no inclusion of baptism. Was I deprived simply because I went ahead with baptism like Jesus taught and the eunuch did? (Mark 16:15f; Acts 8:26-40). If baptism is not a part of the conversion process, I should have had the feeling before baptism when I decided to commit my life to Christ.

Are forgiveness, the new birth, and the reception of the Holy Spirit things to be felt? If so, what sort of feeling is it? How could we be sure? If some inner feeling at the moment one believes in Jesus and decides to entrust his life to him is confirmation of our new birth and salvation, why did it not come to me before my baptism, or after it? Yes, I felt better emotionally after obeying the gospel, but that was because I had apprehensions about my condition that were relieved when I did what I thought I was supposed to do to be forgiven. If I did the wrong thing thinking it was the right thing, my feelings would have been the same. So, emotional feelings are no evidence of pardon. Forgiveness is in the mind of God rather than in my mind. Saving faith must be based upon Biblical evidences, not subjective feelings. Emotions have a subtle way of overruling the word of God and thus becoming authoritative. People of diverse beliefs, whether Methodist, Mormon, or Muslim, have feelings thought to confirm their rightness before God.

If the doctor calls you after extensive tests and tells you that you have inoperable cancer, you will feel devastated. If he calls you back later to explain that records were confused with those of another patient and that you have no sign of cancer, you will feel overjoyed. And the reverse of that is true. If the first report says you are free of cancer, you would be happy. The second report indicating severe malignancy will depress you. Feelings are not dependable indicators of either physical or spiritual health.

When dealing with the spiritual, it becomes easy for us to transfer from belief based on evidence to reliance on subjectivity, depending, I suppose, upon whether we are right-brained or left-brained in our logic and emotion. Satan can deceive through our emotions, so feelings must be in harmony with the written word.

“I can feel the Spirit of God in our midst tonight in this assembly,” we hear someone declare. What does He feel like? Are you sure it is not the mood created by the occasion or some things said or songs sung – the

same kind of moods felt in pagan assemblies? The Spirit of God is in the midst of every gathering of disciples for he indwells each of us regardless of the emotional mood of the group.. Our bodies are temples of God. The Spirit is in each of us twenty-four hours each and every day whether we feel him or not.

Because of his omnipresence, we can say that God is present in the building even when no one is there, just as he is in the residence we left and in the space between our house and the building. When the first disciple unlocks and enters the building (or any other structure), the Spirit in the indwelled person is in the building also. Is that something that can be sensed? That has nothing to do with excitement or imperceptible influences. We accept that by faith because of evidences based on Biblical teaching. Paul still says that we walk by faith, not by sight (or physical senses).

I wonder about the concepts of God and the subjective feelings about him that are expressed in some of our songs. Even granting poetic license, I wonder what we really mean when we sing, *Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus, to reach out and touch Him, etc.*, or, *Jesus, let us come to know You. / Let us see You face to face. / Touch us, hold us, use us, mold us; etc.*

David went to the literal place designated as the meeting place with God, the House of the Lord, the dwelling place of His Presence. When we sing, *Come into His presence with thanksgiving in your heart and give him praise*, or, *I just want to be where you are, etc.*, are we thinking the church building is the house of God or that the assembly is the meeting place with God? Are not such expressions a reaffirmation of the limited concept that our worship is done in a building in a sanctified assembly where we go to be with God? The truth to be realized is that God dwells in us and with us every moment. Each moment is dedicated to him in whole-life worship and service offered continually. This realization brings us assurance free from dependence upon emotional highs or lows.

Am I denying that God works in our lives or that we might experience any emotion in religion. No. By faith, I give God credit for directing my life and giving me good things, yet I have no definite proof of specific instances. If I could prove it, it would no longer be faith. When I see the things that happen to me as being in harmony with what God teaches in the Scriptures, then I can have that assurance and conviction. *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1)* Faith is assurance and conviction based upon evidences rather than knowledge based upon proof.

Is the working of the Lord to be discerned by experience? While garden seed were in good supply, I bought several kinds early, including cucumbers. Weeks later, as I was planting the seed, the cucumber seed were not to be found. I don't know what happened to them. Yesterday, as I was buying groceries, I picked up another package of seed. Back home, while putting the groceries in the pantry, the cucumber seed were not to be found! Nor had I been charged for them. Now, what am I supposed to conclude from that? Is God warning me not to plant cucumbers, or is it a frustration from Satan? If it was just my carelessness, was God or Satan using it to teach me something? Or am I just losing my faculties? Maybe you protest that I am dealing with trivia in which God is not concerned. But if he is not concerned with little things, he is not concerned with big ones for they are made of little ones. If he is not aware of the atom, he is not aware of the world made of them. He sees the sparrow's fall and the fast-falling hairs of my head. Or, more related to my work, my computer crashed. It took three frustrating weeks and three trips to the computer hospital to get it working right again. Was God or Satan behind it? You may think you know the answer, but I don't. I can only leave my life open for the working of God, trust the working of his Spirit within me, and give him credit for the good I discern. All this is to be discerned with understanding rather than the flow of adrenaline.

Gifted speakers, actors, and singers can have a hypnotic effect on people. When such a mesmerizing effect is created in a religious gathering, it is often attributed to the presence of the Holy Spirit like when we sing, *Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place; / I can feel His mighty power and His grace*. In secular gatherings where such an atmosphere is created by charismatic performers and speakers, is it also the work of the Holy Spirit? How can we tell if entrancing moods are caused by men or God? You say you have the gift of discernment? How do you know that the supposed gift is not a Satanic deception? Or am I supposed to be too gullible to ask such critical questions?

One of the problems related to the dependence upon emotion is the tendency of burn-out. Desirable activities repeated constantly soon lose their appeal, just like eating your favorite meal of steak and potatoes for dinner each evening year after year. Emotional highs and euphoric worship wear down so that more effort must be put forth to increase the intensity. There must be something more solid and sustaining than feeling. Intellectual conviction based upon understanding of God's message must be the basis of all worship and feeling.

We tend to choose the highest expressions of David's praise as a model for our own praise. In his euphoria he would call for the inanimate components of the universe to sing God's praises. I doubt, however, if he had a thirty-minute session every Sabbath morning for forty years singing those lofty praises. He could hardly have avoided some ritual, dullness, and insensitivity. And I doubt if God had such sessions in mind for him, else he would have included weekly assemblies for worship in the Law of Moses. With God observing those repetitious renditions of the latest copyrighted songs of praise (with fees paid and permission granted), I can imaginethinking, "That is good, but it is not exactly what I had in mind. I prefer that they be helping other strugglers."

David possibly suffered from bipolar disorder, judging from his high and low moods. Much, if not most, of the world's greatest literature, art, and music has been created by manic-depressive persons. Not only could David ascend to the highest heavens in praise, he could also suffer the depths of depression. His depressed feelings nurtured escapism expressed in his wishing for wings of a bird that he might fly away. Was he less worshipful when he cried out in the depths of despair than when he praised with the loudest voice? Actually, in the long run, according to my observation, depression is easier to live with and closer to reality than the stages of mania or euphoria.

Many of us have taken part in a bare ritual of the Lord's Supper year after year wishing that thoughtfulness would be restored to it. Its rich meaning should stir deep feelings. But if it is made to be emotional, how long can the feeling be renewed week after week? Over a fifty-year period of participation, the feeling must be stirred higher and higher for the effect to be felt.

Already some have branded me as a false teacher. I will give them more cause here. Less frequent participation, like monthly, quarterly, or annually may allow for an impressive stirring of feelings each time without a dulling effect. The only reference to frequency that Jesus made was "as often" as you participate. That was said in the setting of the Passover feast. "As often" as they observed the Passover they recalled their deliverance from Egypt. Now, "as often" as we eat the Supper we recall our deliverance from sin. To argue that annual observance would be insufficient to keep the memory fresh would be to argue that the annual Passover would have been insufficient. I am not defending law or tradition but speaking of avoiding emotional dullness and burnout. If you would gain spiritual benefit from communion "as often" as each weekday and twice on Sunday, that would be in harmony with its purpose.

In this essay, as is often my case, I have strayed from any discernible outline, throwing in kibbles and bits which you may find neither nourishing or digestible. I trust, however, that you can see my purpose. Our religion should bring joyous feelings of blessedness and assurance. These emotions should be nurtured by realizations of truth. We can be free from the insensitivity of repetitious rituals. Yet, there should not be a dependence upon euphoric stimulation, and those feelings must never become the authoritative proofs of our connection with God. []