

Peter's Second Conversion

A sermon delivered by Joel Snider, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Rome, Ga., on August 5, 2012.

Acts 10:1-23

Morning Prayer:

O Lord, through your son, Jesus, you did open your arms to welcome and to bless children. At the beginning of this school year, we ask a blessing again for each child in the community as they return to school. Awaken in each of their minds the desire to learn and surround each tender life with support and encouragement in the learning journey. May all of those who hunger for knowledge feast at the banquet of learning. Remove distractions in each child's life. Help those who must deal with fractured families as they attempt to learn. Remove stress from young lives where homelessness or poverty impinges upon their education. We also pray that the best and the brightest would not only learn but would catch a vision of what good their learning might do in the world. We ask as well for a blessing upon those that you have set aside to teach. Give them inspired wisdom for managing a classroom, increase their love of all children in their care, and renew their passion for the teaching profession itself. We pray that this very week you would provide affirmation that each teacher is in the right place with the right children, teaching the right thing. We ask all of this in the name of the one whose disciples called him "Rabbi, Teacher," our Lord, your son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Meditation Text:

To refuse to be continuously converted puts a stumbling block in the growth of our spiritual life. There are areas of self-will in our lives where our pride pours contempt on the throne of God and says, "I won't submit." We deify our independence and self-will and call them by the wrong name. What God sees as stubborn weakness, we call strength. There are whole areas of our lives that have

not yet been brought into submission, and this can only be done by this continuous conversion. Slowly but surely we can claim the whole territory for the Spirit of God.

—Oswald Chambers in *My Utmost for His Highest*

Baptists are part of a broader group of Christians that we call *evangelicals*. If you take the broad spectrum of Christians and take a narrower slice and call that the *evangelical tradition*, you will find in that slice Baptists. Among evangelicals and other denominations and other faith traditions like us, we place a very high emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This is what sets us apart.

We believe that each person, at an age where they can make the decision, makes a decision for Christ. We find this expressed a lot of different ways. Some people will say, “I invited Jesus into my heart.” Other people will say, “I became a Christian.” Other people will say, “I have made Jesus Lord” or will use the expression “born again.” But there is a point, that place when the decision is made, where life was one way and now we know Jesus Christ personally, and it is another way. The word we often use is *decision*. In other days when there were revivals around, someone would ask after the revival, “How many decisions were there?”

If our children go to camp, people will often ask, “Were there any decisions while they were gone to camp?” I believe the Billy Graham organization magazine is called *Decision*, and it is all based on that point where a person conscientiously decides *I believe that Jesus is God’s son and I accept that and come to know Christ for myself*. There is a conversion or decision and that is what makes us evangelical.

Conversions are of many different sizes and shapes. I always like to use the illustration of C. S. Lewis because it is so absolutely low key. Some of you may be familiar with *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, which was written by C. S. Lewis. But in one of his Christian works, after a visit to the London zoo, C. S.

Lewis mentions, *When I got on the bus, I didn't believe; when I got off the bus, I did.* Somewhere on that bus ride, it happened.

Then there is something similar to what happened to the French philosopher, Pascal. When he died, they found these words sewn inside his coat:

In the year of Grace, 1654,

On Monday, 23rd of November, Feast of St. Clement,

Pope and Martyr, . . .

From about half past ten in the evening until about

half past twelve,

FIRE

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,

not of the philosophers and scholars.

Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.

God of Jesus Christ . . .

Forgetfulness of the world and of everything,

except God. . . .

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

I have separated myself from Him. . .

Let me not be separated from Him eternally.

"This is the eternal life, that they might know Thee,

the only true God, and the one whom Thou hast

sent, Jesus Christ" [John 17:3]

Jesus Christ.

JESUS CHRIST

We don't know exactly what happened, but I think we can be relatively sure that it wasn't simply a bus ride around London. Something very dramatic happened, and in that moment, everything changed. This was the moment of conversion, the moment of decision.

We have models in the New Testament. Probably the most common one mentioned is the Apostle Paul who was on his way to Damascus when the blinding light strikes. Paul is knocked off his donkey and he encounters Jesus Christ.

Perhaps one that is less noticed, but equally instructive, is the conversation of Simon Peter. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record it. They are at Caesarea Philippi, and at Caesarea Philippi, there are altars and shrines to a variety of gods. All of these altars to different gods are in the backdrop there.

In that setting, Jesus looks at the disciples and says, "Who does everyone say that I am?"

They begin to give a variety of answers.

He looks at them and says, "Who do you say that I am?"

In that moment, Peter makes the decision and says, "You are the Christ of God," and that is where it all changes. It is that point that everything led up to, and now everything after is different. In Peter's case, it was different but it was surely not over.

In the garden when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, Peter was one of the ones who fled. Later, outside the place where Jesus was being tried, three times Peter was asked, "Aren't you with him?" and three times Peter said, "I don't know the man." Of course, when the rooster crowed, he fled in embarrassment and in

shame.

Then on the shore of the Sea of Galilee after Christ had been raised, he had been denied three times, and three times Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" and gave him a challenge, "Feed my sheep."

When the Day of Pentecost came, Peter was the one who stood and preached and 5,000 people were converted. There was this point when he confessed, "Christ is Lord," and then he dropped to the depths of faith. He was brought back up and he became a great leader in the early church.

In Acts 10, Peter is doing well, respected in the early church. He has not backslid, and he has not denied Christ again. Nothing like this has happened. He was minding his own business at Simon the Tanner's house. He was up on the roof, and downstairs they were cooking. The aroma of all those smothered onions was coming up the stairs and Peter began to have a vision about eating. That would be fairly normal, but in this vision, he had a vision of eating all these things that, in the Jewish tradition, were considered to be unclean.

He heard the voice of the Lord say, "Come and eat."

Peter said, "I can't eat this. I have been a good Jew all my life. I have never eaten anything like this."

Three times the word came to him, and as soon as the dream was over, there was a knock on the door, and it was unclean people. Unclean people sent by Cornelius, a Roman, came to invite Peter to come to their master's house to tell about Jesus.

This chapter reads so effortlessly and beautifully that we don't even realize that this is a crisis. Peter, a person of his time and era, as prejudiced as anyone of his faith and heritage would be, could not imagine going to the house of a Gentile. "I didn't eat anything unclean, and I sure never went to a Gentile's house," but he was being invited and he realized that this dream had something to say to him.

As the story goes on, Peter went to the house and preached and a number of Gentiles were converted and believed in Jesus Christ. The change in Peter who would have lived out his prejudice had he not had this encounter in a dream with God on a roof is as dramatic as when he made his confession of Christ at Caesarea Philippi. We could call it his *second conversion*. Prejudice dropped away, he began to reach out, and the church began to grow and actually included people like us.

If you look back at Peter's life, it is very much like a conversion. His life was changed. His understanding of what God was doing in the world was dramatically different, and the change was like a conversion.

For those of us of the evangelical tradition, Peter's change gives word to the experience that we often have. We believe that we accepted Christ early on, and then something happens in our lives that is so dramatically different in our relationship to God. Sometimes I have encountered people who even doubt that they ever believed before. They understand God better, feel so much closer to God, and feel like they are more aligned to the purposes of God on earth that they wonder if they were ever a Christian in the first place. As evangelicals, we do not have a way to describe what happens when these continued processes of God's conversion take place in our lives. The changes later are sometimes more dramatic than the first change that took place.

I was a sixth grader when I did repent of my sins. I can tell you that my heart was pretty dark, but there have been some things that have happened in my life that are more dramatic than what happened to me as a sixth grader. In each one of those things, there have been points in which my relationship with God has changed. When I look back at the first, it seems so inconsequential that I wonder, *What part of my life was that?*

That happens to you, doesn't it? It happens to each of us where, all of a sudden, prayer becomes so real that we think, *I was just playing at prayer before. Did I really know God?* Something may happen where there is a moment of forgiveness. Somebody forgives us or we finally relent and forgive somebody

else, and we realize the magnitude of what it costs and what it heals. All of a sudden, it comes to us: *This is what happens when God forgives me.* It changes everything. The moment before seems like nothing compared to the moment after. Maybe we have a transformation of our prejudices like Peter in which we come to see the world and people in a new light and we just think, *Wow! Was I really a Christian before?*

We just don't have a vocabulary as evangelicals to explain these dramatic changes that come later. If it is associated with morality, we usually want to make it easy by saying, "Well, they backslid." I love that old evangelical word. A lot of times it does not have anything to do with morality. It is just a step in growth with God that makes everything that comes before seem like nothing.

Leslie Weatherhead preached in London in the middle of the 20th Century. He is one of my favorite preachers from the era. He tells the story about the missionary in Africa who was lost in the jungle at night. He stumbled through the bush, tripped over roots, and pushed away branches. Finally, there in the night in the middle of the jungle, he came to a road and he was so glad to see the road that he could have knelt down and kissed it. He said, "I came to the end of my wanderings and the beginning of my journey." He had not gotten home yet, but the wandering had stopped and the journey had begun. There had been a starting point, and then now, he was on his way home.

I think that is the way to think about the Christian life. There is a point where we make an initial decision, but there will be more challenge. There will be more change. Hopefully, there will be more adventure, and we trust in God that there will be continued transformation. Would any of us want to believe that if we accepted Christ at sixth grade, tenth grade, as a college student, or as a young adult, that is all the faith we are ever going to have?

Conversion properly understood begins at a point but lasts a lifetime. God is continually working to convert all those other corners of our lives, all those other pockets of resistance, all those places in our hearts that are not quite yielded to God yet.

For Peter, it was that prejudice and it opened him up to be able to minister to a whole new group of people that extended the Gospel to the entire world. If you don't believe this, let me just ask: Is there not a corner in your heart where you don't yet love all your neighbors as yourself? Is there a shadow in your heart that hides the fact that you do not yet love your enemies? Is there somebody somewhere that you think, *God you are just going to have to let it go because I am never going to forgive that person?*

What about our generosity? Is our generosity totally converted to be aligned with the purposes of God? In Christian service, have we given our best to Christ to serve where Christ would have us serve? Do we always pray as we should? Do we love scripture as much as scripture could bless us? No. There are still those places that are waiting upon the full conversion of God to take place.

We think about Paul so much in his Damascus Road experience, but maybe for many of us, Peter is a more instructive example because his life is continually going through these changes to become more like Jesus Christ. There is a second, third, fourth, and an ongoing lifetime of conversion. Isn't that a wonderful thing to think that even though many of us have accepted Christ once upon a time in an earlier day and God has worked in our lives all these months, years, and decades, God is not done? God can still transform who we are to become more like Jesus. Like so many things about the message of Christ, we call that "Good News."