

Conversion

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Date: 12 March 2017

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[0 : 00] Turn to the book of Acts, chapter 3. There's three short readings, so they're all in the book of Acts, so it sort of made it easy in many ways.

Acts, chapter 3, beginning at verse 17. As you're making your way there, this is after Peter's sermon at Pentecost, you know, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the birth of the church.

People are Christians. Lots and lots of people are Christians now. And we pick it up in chapter 3, verse 17. Now hear God's word. And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers, but what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent, therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out.

Turn to Acts, chapter 11, verse 19. So Acts, chapter 11, verse 19 reads, Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen, traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, also preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them.

[1 : 45] And a great number who believed turned to the Lord. Our final reading is in Acts, chapter 13, and verse 44.

Verse 44. Verse 44. The next Sabbath, almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you.

Since you thrust aside and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, I have made your light to the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. Well, I pray that God would bless his word as we continue to look at biblical Christianity.

[3 : 00] And I want to stress the importance of biblical Christianity in the light that there are other versions of Christianity out there. But that's nothing new. The early church experienced a different form of Christianity.

And that's the problem. The question is, which Christianity do you fall into? Is it the true biblical Christianity?

Or is your Christianity sort of a made-up one? And there's no shortage of people who make up their own version of Christianity. That's a big problem.

Well, the only answer is to go back to the word of God, to get a thorough grasp of the word of God, you know, so that we know what biblical Christianity is. Well, we come to another unique part tonight, and it's conversion.

Now, I understand I may be going out on a limb. But as a pastor, I think maybe after six years and a bit, I may have just earned just enough respect for you to listen to the argument, to the sermon.

[4 : 07] I believe the Bible teaches that Christian conversion is unique. Absolutely unique. And you think, well, that's not a shocking statement.

Good. Because it means that we're on the same page. But I really do believe that Christian conversion is unique. It's for several reasons, but the most obvious one is that it is a work of God. And therefore, we don't convert ourselves, God converts us. That's a really important distinction to make. You know, we've just read a whole situation here of people turning to God, and that's really good.

But that turning to God isn't what makes Christianity unique. And we'll come to that. Rather, what makes Christianity unique is the fact that God turns us to himself.

And that's really important. David Wells, in his book called *Turning to God*, makes this point. He says that Christianity, without this unique conversion, is no longer Christianity.

[5 : 12] In other words, this unique conversion is what makes Christianity Christianity. And that's the important thing that I'm trying to stress this evening.

The uniqueness of the Christian faith. Of being a Christian. Now, as you read through the book of Acts, this is something that you'll read. That people over and over again, chapter 3, chapter 11, and other chapters, you know, they're turning to God.

And what happens when people turn to God? Well, you know, their lives change. But their turning to God, their experience of turning to God, you know, is very, very different.

Some people have very dramatic turning experiences. You know, they've lived the life the way that they've wanted to. And then all of a sudden, you know, God meets them.

And, you know, their life is literally turned around in one day. One moment of one day. You know, they repent and believe. And literally, from that moment onwards, they're a different person.

[6 : 17] They've turned to God. But here's the thing. That's not what makes Christianity unique. It's not even close to what makes Christianity unique. What about those people who grow up in Christian homes?

You know, a bit like I was saying this morning. You know, and I've had the blessing of, you know, parents teaching them the gospel. You know, they can't really remember a time when they turned to God.

And they can't remember a time of ever turning away from God. You know, they've always followed God. You know, there's been no dramatic experience, but there is a definite following. Yeah, they repent. You know, they repent daily, but they've always repented because that's what their parents taught them how to do.

You know, parents ought to repent in front of their children so that children know how to repent. You know, and then these children just follow God. You know, they're adults now.

And there's no dramatic turning, no dramatic conversion experience. But are they saved? Oh, yeah, they're definitely saved. But that's not what makes Christian conversion unique either.

[7 : 20] It's just another experience of turning to God. Or what about those others who, you know, grow up in a Christian home, you know, receive all the teaching, receive all the blessings, but then wander.

You know, and they wander maybe for one year, maybe five years, maybe 15 years. And then all of a sudden, they come back. And suddenly, you know, they feel the work of God and they turn to God again.

Or they turn back to God, as the Jews were being told by the apostles. You know, turn back to God, you know, in true faith. Turn back to him. You know, that's a definite reality.

That happens to people all the time. You know, people growing up in the faith, leaving the faith, or it appears that they've left the faith, and then coming back stronger than ever. The thing is, all of these experiences of turning to God are wonderful and they're great, but they're not what makes Christianity unique.

And you can see that from the very fact that they're all different. None of them are the same. No one's turning experience to God ever really appears the same. It's true that people turn to God in different ways, and their turning is a definite turning.

[8 : 39] But that's not what makes Christianity unique. You know, something unique is something that stands out above everything else. Something that can't be compared to anything else, but is the same for everyone.

That's Christian conversion. So what is that? That's what God does. Christian conversion is God turning you to himself.

Not your experience of you turning, but the very fact that you've been given a heart to turn. The very fact that God has already done a work within your life and within your soul and within your heart. You know, God has gone to work in your very being. That's what makes Christianity unique. So here's the thing.

You are a unique person. You know, maybe you've been told that before. Or maybe you haven't. I'm going to tell you this evening. You are a unique person. And you're unique because Christianity

is unique.

[9 : 42] There's no one like you in one sense, but there's lots of people like you in another sense, because they've all been turned around by God. The fact that you follow God, it is because God has done something in your life that he's done in the person next to you that you sit next to tonight.

That's what's unique about Christianity. We share the same conversion experience. Not our turning experience, but our conversion experience. We know that God has redeemed us.

He has rescued us. He has given us a new heart. He has put his Holy Spirit within us. He makes us fall in love with Jesus through the cross. That's unique.

But it's unique in the sense that we all share in it. God brings us to himself. So I want to go through several things that we notice here. First, the things that are different.

The things that are different is people's experiences. That is something that we have to acknowledge. No one turns to God like the person next to them, but that's not what makes Christianity unique.

[10 : 51] You know, some people follow Christ and they can't remember never not following Christ. You know, that's important. But those things are different. And those things that are different, though true, though are perhaps your testimony, is not what makes Christian conversion unique.

Christian conversion happens because of something that God does. So let's concentrate now, just for a moment, on the things that God does that makes your Christianity so unique.

Here's number one. God takes you from sin and death to faith in life. That's a dramatic conversion. That's unique. To go from sin and death, no concern with God, no love for God, no faith, to faith in life.

That's a dramatic conversion. However slowly it may happen, however insignificant it may appear on the sort of scheme of things, that is a dramatic change in your life.

The fact that you have faith in God is a unique experience. The fact that you love God is unique.

The fact that you have this eternal life is a wonderful truth.

[12 : 06] You know, Christianity or Christian conversion is explained in Scripture like this. I'm going to give you a few Scriptures. Here's number one. You have been resurrected to a new life. You're dead and you're resurrected to a new life.

That's Romans 6, verses 3 and 4. In other words, your Christian conversion is called a resurrection. You've been resurrected already. Colossians 3, verses 9 and 10.

You have gone from death to life. You know, that's a dramatic change, isn't it? You know, you say, well, I didn't consider myself dead before I was saved. No, to God, you were dead.

You were spiritually dead. You know, nothing spiritually good could have come out of your life whatsoever. It couldn't produce anything. John 5, verse 24 and Ephesians 2, 1 to 6.

From death to life. Christian conversion is where God makes you his possession. In other words, here's another thing that makes Christian conversion so unique.

[13 : 11] You've been bought. You've been purchased. You know, what are you worth? You know, perhaps people get hang-ups on how much they're actually worth.

You know, what is the value of your life? You know, how much are you worth to your friends? You know, how much are you worth to your mum or to your dad or to your loved ones? How much are you worth? Well, Christian conversion is so unique that the way that it explains it is that you're a possession of God.

God makes you his very own possession. He bought you with a price. The death of his son, the shed blood. That's the uniqueness of your conversion.

Romans 6, verses 17 and 18. Another one. You have put off the old self and put on the new self. Galatians 3, verse 27. You know, all of this is unique.

All of it is a work of God. It is unique. It is necessary. But more importantly, it's supernatural. You know, that's a difficult challenge, isn't it?

[14 : 21] To be able to take into consideration just for a moment, you know, that what I've undergone is a supernatural change. You know, I don't feel superhuman. And perhaps you don't sat there.

Perhaps you feel pretty tired and run down and worn out. You know, not according to God. You know, according to God, you are an absolutely... You're a person that has gone through a supernatural change.

You know, I don't feel all that super. Well, God says, no, you have been supernaturally changed. Now, that's unique. That's the very work of God in your life.

And why is all this possible? Well, we know the answer. The cross, the life, the death, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. God gives us his very life.

In fact, there is a distinction, I think, that can be made here. In other words, don't ever describe your conversion as life-altering. You know, describe it as life-giving.

[15:28] Yeah, your life has altered. But it's altered because you've been given a new life, a new spiritual life. But don't talk about it in terms of, you know, my life is different now than what it was.

Of course it's different now than what it was. But think of it in terms of, I have a new life. That's why it's different. It's not just been altered. It's new.

It's gone through a radical change from death to life. You know, these are the things that make your life unique before God. You know, one of my favorite theological points is in Romans 6.

You know, you say to someone, Christ died so that you could live. No. No, he didn't, did he? Now, read the Bible carefully.

You know, Christ died so that you could die. Now, all sinners must die. It's a non-negotiable. The benefit is, is that if you die in Christ, you have the prospect of resurrection.

[16:30] You have the prospect of new life. That's the point. Christ died so that I could die to all my old self. Christ lived so that I could live to this new life that God has given me.

You know, so as you sit there tonight, you know, you're pretty tired. It's been a long week. Or actually, it's only the beginning of a new week. And you need to go out in the spiritual strength that you have. And you think, you know, I just can't muster it.

I'm tired as it is. No, think about what God has done for you. You know, you've gone through a spiritual change. Notice the uniqueness of the life that you have.

So don't focus on, you know, the things that are the old. Focus on, you know, set your mind on things that are above, as Paul says. Don't focus on your turning experience is something that's unique.

Focus on what God has done as the unique things. The things that really make a difference in your life. We move on then to, I think, an important subject.

[17:31] And that is the converted life. In other words, it has to be different. The converted life has to be different than any other type of life.

It's not the same as an unbeliever's life. And it's not the same as any other type of life that is out there. Because you've gone through a supernatural change.

You know, God, by his very spirit, is living within you. God, by his Holy Spirit, manifests his life within your very self. I don't know how you think about that. You know, you're sat at home. And you read these verses that say God lives in you.

You know, God's dwelling place is your life. That the spirit, the spirit of God, God himself, manifests himself through your life. You sat there watching TV.

Notice what's happening to you. God is living his life through you. And here we are. When's the next program on?

[18:33] Did I miss that soap? What am I going to eat? Okay, these are very normal everyday life things. There's nothing wrong with them. Don't miss out on what God has done.

On the unique things that make you unique. Okay, don't get into a spiritual slothfulness where you're too tired to think about the spiritual things of what God has actually done in your life.

Conversion, then, is necessary. That's another point to focus on, isn't it? You know, if you're to have life with God, if you're to have fellowship, conversion is absolutely necessary.

In other words, we can't have any relationship with God without a unique conversion. It's also necessary for serving God. It's necessary for obeying God. You know, none of these things are possible unless we go through a unique conversion experience.

And here's the other thing. You know, we've already done it this evening, so you're used to it by now. Prayer. You know, why does God listen to you? Do you have people who won't listen to you?

[19:44] I have a congregation. No, I'm only joking. God listens. One of the things I find striking in Scripture is God is under no obligation whatsoever to hear the prayers of unbelievers.

In fact, he even says, you know, that where a person regards iniquity in their heart, he doesn't listen to their prayer. It goes unheard. It doesn't even take it into consideration.

But you, no, you're different. God listens to you. Every word of praise that comes out of your mouth, every concern that you have, every grumble that you have, you know, God's ear is with your voice. He listens to everything. Why? Because you're unique. He's made you unique through this Christian conversion. A unique, supernatural, necessary, spiritual change.

A unique event in your life. The other thing is, is the obedience. I don't know about you, but I always get obedience wrong for a number of different reasons.

[20 : 52] Because I still operate on the old man principles rather than the new man. What's the difference? Well, I think too many Christians try to obey God in the flesh.

Don't ever try to obey God. It's never going to work. You're never going to be able to do it properly. There's a number of reasons why.

You'll try to obey God and you'll fail. And then a pattern will start developing in your life. And it will go something like this. I'm trying, I'm trying, I'm trying. But I'm failing, I'm failing, I'm failing. There's only one option left.

Okay, because you're not spiritually inclined, there's only one option left and it goes something like this. I'm going to disobey because I know I can confess. I tried to obey, but I failed.

So the only option left for me now is to disobey and then confess. Yet, that's the old man. That's the unbeliever's way of trying to obey God.

[21 : 53] It doesn't work for the Christian because it's never meant to work for the Christian. What is the Christian difference? Here's the difference. You trust God to obey. Don't try to obey, trust to obey.

You know, trust God that he will give you the strength to be able to say no to sin and to be able to say yes to him. You know, trust in his grace that gives you that strength to be able to do that type of thing.

And here's why. Remember I said the converted life, it has to be different. And here's why. 1 John says that anyone who continues in sin is not a child of God.

His point is very simple. The converted life leads to less sinning. You sin less as a Christian. Not some Christians sin less.

No. All Christians, because of their unique conversion, sin less. Sin less than they ever did before. Now, that's pretty important.

[22 : 59] You know, why don't you continue in sin? Well, because I can confess. Well, that's true. But it's more important that you understand what 1 John says.

I'm going to read it to you. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning. For God's seed abides in him. He cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.

Yeah, that's John's testimony of a Christian. If you're a Christian, you can't keep on sinning. It's impossible. If you're a Christian, you won't continue to sin.

That's unique. That's the uniqueness of Christian conversion. You don't continue to sin. Yeah, you still will every now and then.

But you don't make a practice of sinning. You don't continue in it daily. And the moment you do sin, you confess of that sin. This is why Peter says that we've become partakers of the divine nature.

[24 : 03] This is why Peter says that true conversion changes your appetite for God. It changes your will, your emotions, your thoughts, your desire. Everything changes. Nothing remains the same.

You have gone through a definite spiritual change. And the change is such that you don't carry on sinning. Now, this is why people stay away from 1 John.

It's a very difficult book to read. And believe it or not, it was written for very young Christians. You know, not Christians that have lived 20 or 30 years. Christians that have only lived a couple of years.

He says to them, you know, little children, keep yourself from idols. Children, don't go on sinning because that's not what children of God do. They don't do that type of thing. You know, we're sort of wrapping it up now.

And so I want to address a couple more issues. The final issue before we get to the exhortation is you've got to protect it. I think we've got to protect the uniqueness of Christian conversion because the Bible does.

[25 : 04] You know, does the uniqueness of Christian conversion need protecting? And the answer is yes. It definitely, you know, the job of an elder, go read Titus, is to teach and to defend the faith

once delivered.

We have to teach and defend the truth. It's not enough just to teach. Teaching is okay. But you've got to be able to defend the truth. That's when you get yourself into trouble.

Okay, here's why. Because it's one thing to be able to stand here and tell you the truth. You can decide whether or not you take it on board or not. I don't know.

You can decide whether or not you accept it into your heart and into your mind. You will decide what you're going to do with it. I don't know. That's okay until I actually start defending it.

And I start, hey, you remember I taught this? You think it was okay for you to just take the bits that you want and leave out the bits that you don't want?

[26 : 05] Well, that's fine from a teacher, you know. But now I've come to defend the truth. Yeah, that's way more difficult. You know, that's why people don't like pastors. The defending.

You know, and if we're to teach and defend the truth, part of that is teaching and defending the uniqueness of Christian conversion. And that means we have to be able to tell the difference between real conversion and false conversions if we're to protect the true conversion.

Here's the thing about lying. You know, a false conversion is a lie. But do you know how lies work? I'll tell you how they work. Lies have to appear to be true in order to be believed.

You don't believe a lie if you know that it's a lie. You don't believe a lie if you know that it's not true.

You believe a lie when you believe it to be true. And that's how lies get into the church.

That's how false conversions get into the church because people believe them to be true. Yeah, the role of the elder is not to say, you know, one person is saved and another person is. That's not the role.

[27 : 14] But we are to teach and defend the truth. You know, protect the value of Christian conversion. And that means we have to be able to spot the difference between a lie and a truth.

It's not always easy. But a thorough knowledge of the gospel is what does it. You know, Paul had this problem with the church at Galatia. You know, they've departed from the gospel.

They've gone over to a different version. In other words, they're denying the uniqueness of their converted life. And then Paul has this to say to Peter. Peter sinned in public.

And you know the rule. We apply this rule in this church, or I've applied it, that when you sinned in public, you repent in public. Very important.

Really important. You know, you can't just sin in front of your children and then go and repent to God upstairs. That's not where the sin was committed, in the room on your own before God.

[28 : 08] It was committed before people. That's where it needs to be repented of. That's Peter's problem. He's denying the uniqueness of Christian conversion because he's eating with Jews rather than the Christian party.

And Paul's got a problem with this. And he says to him, Peter, you know, if you carry on the way that you are, you're going to lead all these believers down the same path you're going.

And it's the wrong path. Denying the uniqueness of Christian conversion. You know, you're denying the gospel effectively. Now, Paul isn't saying to Peter, you know, I don't know if you're a Christian or not.

What he's saying to Peter is, you're not living as though you are. You're not protecting the uniqueness of your own conversion because you're not living as though you're a converted person. Now, that's the problem, isn't it? That's a problem that needs addressing. Why? Because it takes everybody else with you. And that's what Paul was experiencing in the Church of Galatia. You know, one person goes off the rail.

[29 : 08] It's never just one person. Other people follow, even if they don't look as though they're following. That's how serious it is to protect the uniqueness of Christian conversion.

You know, there's the issue of memetic rivalry. You know, I'm just going to copy the next person because I can't think for myself. You know, we all do it. You know, go away and protect the uniqueness of your conversion.

Here's the exhortation then as we close. Conversion has to be protected. And here's a number of reasons why. Number one, your life is determined by God.

I don't know how you feel about that. The purpose of your life is determined by God. Again, challenging. The direction of your life is determined by God.

You know, I find that one the most challenging of all. The direction of my life. In other words, I forget who said it, but it rings true. If you're unable to determine what the will of God is today, you're not

going to be able to tell what the will of God is in the future.

[30 : 15] You're just not going to be able to do it. If you can't tell what it is today, you're not going to be able to get it right in the future. God determines the direction of our life.

That's the uniqueness of Christian conversion. This is why we don't find it hard to thank God. Because God does it all. It's all a work of God. That's why we don't find it hard to thank Him. We've contributed nothing. God does it all. So let me finish with this as a final point. Why does it need to be protected?

Well, here's why. You protect whatever you value. It could be your car. It could be your house. I don't know. It could be the ring on your finger. It could be the watch on your wrist.

I don't know. But you protect what you value. In fact, you even insure it. Don't you find it strange that when you go into cities, that the biggest buildings in a city is either a bank or an insurance firm.

[31 : 17] It seems that we are fixated on security and the insurance. We protect the things that we value the most. Conversion.

This is why Paul corrects. This is why Paul challenges Peter. Why? Because it is a thing so valuable that it needs to be protected by God.

And so we protect the same. Don't lose the truth that your Christian conversion is unique. Go away from here this evening being determined that you're going to protect your own conversion.

Being determined that you're going to protect your own witness. Keep in step with the Spirit so that you don't gratify the desires of the flesh. Protect the uniqueness of your Christian conversion.

So to finish. Christian conversion. It's noticeably different. It's noticeably different. And that's your witness.

[32 : 19] And that's why it's unique. Amen.