



True & False Conversion

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"But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze. This is what you shall receive from My hand: you will lie down in torment." - Isaiah 50:11 (NIV)

We can see from this verse that the prophet was speaking to those who claimed to be religious, and who flattered themselves with the idea that they were in a state of salvation. But in fact, their hope was just a fire of their own kindling-torches created by themselves. Before I go any further in discussing the subject of true and false conversion, I want to say that it will only be of use to those who will be honest in applying it to themselves. If you hope to gain anything at all from what I'm going to say, you must decide to make a faithful application of it personally. Be just as honest as if you thought you were now going to stand before the Lord. If you will do this, then I hope to help you discover your true state with the Lord. If you are now deceived, I hope to direct you to the true path of salvation. But if you will not be honest, my preaching will be useless, and you will hear in vain.

I plan to show the difference between true and false conversion in the following order:

- I. Show that the natural state of man is a state of pure selfishness.
- II. Show that the character of the Christian is that of benevolence. That is, choosing the happiness of others.
- III. Show that the new birth in Christ Jesus consists in a change from selfishness to benevolence.
- IV. Point out some areas where saints and sinners, or true and false converts, are the same - and some areas where they are different.
- V. Answer some questions.
- VI. Conclude with some remarks.

I. The Natural State Of Man, Or The Way All Men Are Before Conversion, Is Pure, Unmingled Selfishness.

Selfishness is putting your own happiness first, and seeking your own good because it is to your benefit. Whoever is selfish places his own happiness above other things of greater value, such as the glory of God and the good of the whole universe. It is obvious that all people before conversion are in this state. Almost everyone knows that people deal with each other on the principle of selfishness. If anyone overlooks this, and tries to deal with others as if they are not selfish, he would be considered a fool.

II. The Character Of A Christian Is That Of Benevolence.

Benevolence is loving the happiness of others, or rather **choosing** the happiness of others. This is God's state of mind. We are told that God is love; that is, He is benevolent. Benevolence makes up His whole character. All of His qualities are only different expressions of His benevolence. Any individual who is converted is in this respect like God. I don't mean that no one is converted unless he is as purely and perfectly benevolent as God is - but that his **prevailing choice** is benevolent. He sincerely seeks the good of others for their own sake, and not because it will make him happy in the end.

God is purely and unselfishly benevolent. He doesn't make people happy for the sake of promoting His own happiness, but because He loves **their** happiness. It's not that He doesn't rejoice to bless them, but His own happiness is not His goal. The man who is unselfish finds joy in doing good. If he didn't love to do good, then doing good would be of no virtue to him.

Benevolence is holiness. It is what the law of God requires. *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,"* and *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* (Matt. 22:37,39 NASB) Just as certainly as the converted man obeys the law of God, he is benevolent like God.

III. True Conversion Is A Change From Supreme Selfishness To Loving The Good Of Others.

True conversion is a change in the **goal** you are seeking, and not a mere change in the way you reach that goal. It's not true that the converted and the unconverted have the same goal, but differ only in the methods they use to get there. That would be like saying the angel Gabriel and the devil himself are both striving for their own happiness, only just trying to get there in two different ways. Gabriel does not obey God for the sake of his own happiness.

A man may change his methods, and yet still have his own happiness as his goal. He may not believe in Jesus, or in eternity, and yet he may see that doing good will be to his advantage in this world and bring him many (temporary) benefits.

Now suppose this man finally does see the reality of eternity and takes up religion as a way to find happiness there. Now, everyone knows that there is no virtue in this. It is not his **service** to the Lord that blesses Him, but his **reasons** for serving God that are important.

The true convert chooses as his goal the glory of God and the good of His Kingdom. He chooses this for its own sake, because he views this as a greater good than his own individual happiness. Not that he doesn't care about his own happiness, but he prefers God's glory, because it is a greater good. He looks on the happiness of every individual according to its real importance (*as far as he is capable of valuing it*), and he chooses **the greatest good as his highest goal**.

IV. Now I Want To Show Some Areas Where True Saints And Deceived Persons May Be The Same - And Some Areas Where They Are Different.

- 1. They may agree in leading a strictly moral life.** The difference is in their motives. The true saint leads a moral life because he loves holiness - the deceived person because of selfish considerations. He uses morality as a means to an end, to bring about his own happiness.
- 2. They may be equally prayerful, as far as the outward form is concerned.** The difference is in their motives. The true saint loves to pray - the person who is deceived prays because he hopes to obtain some benefit for himself from praying. The true saint expects a benefit from praying, but that is not his leading motive. The false convert prays from no other motive.
- 3. They may be equally zealous in religion.** One may have great zeal because his zeal is according to knowledge, and he sincerely desires to serve the Lord for His sake. The false convert may show equal zeal, but for the sake of having his own salvation more assured, and because he is afraid of going to hell if he does not work for the Lord. He may also serve God to quiet his conscience, and not because he truly loves the Lord.
- 4. They may both love God's law** - the true saint because it is so excellent, holy, just, and good; the other because he thinks it will make him happy if he loves it.
- 5. Both may agree on the penalty of the law.** The true saint consents to it in his own case, because he feels it to be just in itself for God to send him to hell. The deceived person feels a respect for it, because he knows that it is right, but he thinks he is in no danger from it.
- 6. They may be equally self-denying in many things.** Self-denial is not confined to true saints. Look at the sacrifices and self-denials of the Muslims, going on their pilgrimage to Mecca. Look at the discipline and self-denial of those lost in the cults and eastern religions. The true saint denies himself for the sake of doing more good to others. His sacrifices are not centered around his own gratification or his own interests. The deceived person may go to equal lengths, but from purely selfish motives.
- 7. They may both be willing to suffer martyrdom.** Read the lives of the martyrs and you will have no doubt that some were willing to suffer from a wrong idea of the rewards of martyrdom. Many would rush to their own destruction because they were convinced that it was the sure road to eternal life.
- 8. Both may pay equal regard to what is right** - the true convert because he loves what is right, and the false convert because he knows he cannot be saved unless he does right. He may be honest in his common business transactions, but if he has no higher motive, he will have no reward from God.
- 9. They may agree in their desires in many respects.**
 - They may agree in their desires to be useful** - the true convert desiring usefulness for its own sake, the deceived person because he knows that's the way to obtain the favor of God.
 - They may both desire the conversion of souls** - the true saint because it will glorify God, the deceived person to gain the favor of God. He will be motivated by this, just as he is in giving money. Everyone knows that a person can give his money to the Bible Society or the Missionary Society from selfish motives alone - to gain happiness, praise from men, or obtain the favor of God. In the same way, he may desire the conversion of souls, and labor to promote it, from purely selfish motives.
 - They may both desire to glorify God** - the true saint because he loves to see God glorified, and the deceived person because he knows that is the way to be saved. The true convert has his heart set on the glory of God for His sake. The other desires it as a benefit to himself.
 - They may both desire to repent.** - The true convert hates sin because it hurts and dishonors God, and therefore he desires to repent of it. The false convert desires to repent because he knows that unless he does, he will be damned.

They may both want to obey God. The true saint obeys so he may increase in holiness. The false convert obeys because he wants the rewards of obedience.

10. They may also agree on the things they love.

They may both love the Bible - the true saint because it is God's truth. He delights in it, and feasts his soul on it. The deceived person loves the bible because he thinks it is in his own favor, and sees it as the plan for fulfilling his own hopes.

They may both love God - the one because he sees God's character to be beautiful and lovely in itself, and he loves Him for His own sake. The other, because he thinks God is his special friend who is going to make him happy forever, and he connects the idea of God with his own selfish interests.

They may both love Christ. The true convert loves His character. The deceived person thinks He will save him from hell, and give him eternal life...so why shouldn't he love him?

They may both love Christians - the true convert because he sees in them the image of Christ, and enjoys their spiritual conversation. The deceived person loves Christians because they belong to his own denomination, or because they are on his side. He also loves to talk about the interest he has in Christianity and the hope he has of going to heaven.

Both may love to attend religious meetings - the true saint because his heart delights in acts of worship, prayer, praise, and in sharing the Word of God - the false convert because he thinks a religious meeting is a good place to prop up his hope.

Both may find pleasure in private prayer - the true saint, because he draws near to God and finds delight in communion with Him. The deceived person finds a self-righteous kind of satisfaction in it, because it is his duty to pray in secret.

They may both love the doctrines of grace - the true saint because they are so glorious to God, the other because he thinks they are the guarantee of his own salvation.

11. They may also agree in hating the same things.

They may both hate sexual immorality and oppose it strenuously. The true saint hates it because it is detestable in itself and contrary to God, and the other because it goes against his views and opinions.

They may both hate sin - the true convert because it is repulsive to God, and the deceived person because it hurts him personally. It's common for people to hate their own sins, and yet not forsake them.

They may both be opposed to sinners. The opposition of true saints is a loving opposition. They see that the character and conduct of sinners is calculated to ruin the Kingdom of God. False converts are opposed to sinners because they are against their religion and because they are not on their side.

In all of these cases, the motives of one class go directly against the other. The difference lies in their choice of goals. One chooses his own interest, the other chooses God's interest as his ultimate goal.

V. I Will Now Answer Some Common Questions.

1. "If these two classes of people are alike in so many things, how are we to know our own real character, or know which class we belong to?" We know that the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked (*Jer. 17:9*), so how are we to know whether we love God and holiness for their own sake, or whether we are seeking the favor of God, and aiming at heaven for our own benefit?"

If we are truly benevolent, it will appear in our daily transactions. If in our dealings with men we are selfish, we will also be selfish in our dealings with God. *"For the one who does not love his brother who he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."* (*I John 4:20 NASB*) Being a Christian is not only loving God, but also loving man. And if our daily business shows us to be selfish, we are unconverted - or else a man can be a Christian without loving his neighbor as himself.

If you are unselfish, your spiritual responsibilities will not be a chore to you. Some people do what God says with the same attitude that a sick man takes his medicine - because he desires its good effects, and he knows he must have it or perish. It is something that he would never do for its own sake.

If you are selfish, your joy will depend mainly on the strength of your hopes of heaven. When you feel very certain of going to heaven then you enjoy being a Christian a great deal. Your joy depends on your hope, and not on your love for the things you are hoping for. I do not say that true saints don't enjoy their hope, but it's not the most important thing to them. They think very little about their own hopes because their thoughts are taken up with other things of greater value.

If you are selfish, your enjoyments will be chiefly from anticipation. The true saint already enjoys the peace of God and has heaven begun in his soul. He doesn't have to wait until he dies to taste the joys of eternal life. His enjoyment is in proportion to his holiness, and not in proportion to his hope.

The deceived person has only a purpose of obedience, while the saint has a preference of obedience. This is an important distinction, and I'm afraid few people make it. The true saint really prefers, and in his heart chooses obedience - therefore he finds it easy to obey. The false convert is determined to be holy, because he knows that it's the only way to be happy. The true saint chooses holiness for its own sake, and he **is** holy.

The true convert and the deceived person also differ in their faith. The true saint has a confidence in the character of God that leads him into whole-hearted submission to Him. True confidence in the Lord's special promises depends on a trust in God's character. There are only two principles on which any government, human or divine, is obeyed - fear and trust. All obedience springs from one of these two principles. In the one case, individuals obey from hope of reward and fear of punishment. In the other case, submission comes from a confidence in the character of the government, which is run by love. One child obeys his parents because he loves and trusts them. The other gives an outward obedience motivated from hopes and fears. The true convert has a faith, or confidence in God, that leads him to obey God from love. This is the obedience of faith.

The deceived person has only a partial faith, and only a partial submission. The devil has a partial faith too. He believes and trembles. A person may believe that Christ came to save sinners, and on that ground may submit to Him to be saved. But he does not submit wholly to His sovereign authority, or give Him control of his life. His submission is only on the condition that he will be saved. It is never with that unreserved confidence in God's whole character that leads him to say, "Thy will be done." His religion is the religion of law. The other has Gospel faith. One is selfish, the other benevolent. Here lies the true difference between the two classes. The religion of one is outward and hypocritical. The other is that of the heart - holy and acceptable to God.

If you are selfish, you will only rejoice in the conversion of sinners when you have part in it. You will have very little satisfaction when it is through others that people are saved. The selfish person rejoices when he is active and successful in converting sinners, because he thinks he will have a great reward. But he will be envious when others lead someone to Christ. The true saint sincerely delights to see others useful, and rejoices when sinners are converted through others as much as if he had a part in it himself.

2. "Shouldn't I have any regard for my own happiness?"

It is all right to be concerned about your own happiness according to its relative value. Measure it against the glory of God and the good of the universe, and then decide - giving it the value which properly belongs to it. This is exactly what God does. And this is what He means when He commands you to love your neighbor as yourself.

Interestingly enough, the less concerned you are about your own happiness - the happier you will be. True happiness consists mainly in the fulfillment of unselfish desires. If you aim at doing good for its own sake, then you will be happy in proportion as you do good. But if you do good simply to secure your own happiness, you will fail. You will be like the child pursuing his own shadow; he can never overtake it, because it's always just so far ahead of him.

3. "Didn't Christ regard the joy set before Him?"

It is true that Christ despised the shame and endured the cross, and had regard to the joy set before Him. But what was the joy set before Him? Not His own salvation, not His own happiness, but the great good He would do in the salvation of the world. The happiness of others was what He aimed at. This was the joy set before Him...and this is what He obtained.

4. "Didn't Moses look to the reward?"

Yes, Moses was looking to the reward. But was that reward to his own profit? Far from it. The reward was the salvation of the people of Israel. At one point God proposed to destroy Israel and make a great nation of Moses. If Moses had been selfish he would have said, "Yes, Lord. Let it be done to Your servant according to Your word." But what does he say? Why, his heart was so set on the salvation of his people, and the glory of God, that he wouldn't think of it for a moment. But instead he said, "*If Thou wilt, forgive their sin - and if not, please blot me out from Thy book which Thou hast written!*" (Ex. 32:32 NASB) This is not the response of a selfish man.

5. "Doesn't the Bible say we love God because he first loved us?"

Where it says, "*We love Him because He first loved us,*" (1 John 4:19) the language implies two different meanings: 1) His love for us has made it possible for us to love Him back; or 2) We love Him for the kindness and favor He has shown to us. The second meaning is obviously not correct because Jesus Christ has so clearly given the principle in His sermon on the mount: "And if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them." (Luke 6:32 NASB) If we love God, not for His character but for His favors to us, we are no different than the unconverted.

6. "Doesn't the Bible offer happiness as the reward of virtue?"

The Bible speaks of happiness as the **result** of virtue, but nowhere is your own happiness given as a reason for doing what is right.

7. "Why does the Bible appeal continually to the hopes and fears of men, if a concern for your own happiness is not the right motive for our actions?"

Man naturally dreads harm, and it is not wrong to avoid it. We may have a concern for our own happiness, but only according to its value.

Also, men are so drunk with sin that God cannot get their attention to consider His true character and the reasons for loving Him, unless He appeals to their hopes and fears. But once they are awakened, He presents the Gospel to them. When a minister has preached the terrors of the Lord until he has his

hearers alarmed and aroused, then he should spread out the character of God before them, to draw their hearts to love Him for His own excellence.

8. "Doesn't the Gospel offer forgiveness as a motive for submission?"

If you mean that the sinner is to repent on the **condition** that he will be forgiven, then I say that the Bible says no such thing. It never authorizes a sinner to say, "I will repent if you will forgive," and nowhere offers forgiveness as a motive of repentance.

VI. Some Closing Remarks.

1. Some people are more anxious to convert sinners than they are to see the Church sanctified and God glorified by the good works of His people.

Many want to see people saved, not because their lives and deeds hurt and dishonor God, but because they feel sorry for them and don't want to see them go to hell. True saints are upset by sin because it is so dishonoring to God. But they are most distressed when they see Christians sin, because it dishonors God even more. Some people seem to care very little about the state of the church, as long as they can see the work of conversion go forward, to them, "successful" evangelistic efforts equal a "successful" church, but they are not really anxious to have God honored. This shows that they are not motivated by a genuine love for God and holiness, but by their own human feelings and emotions for sinners.

2. From all I have just said, it's easy to see why so many professing Christians have such different views on what the Gospel really is.

Some view the Gospel as a mere convenience to mankind, where God is not as strict as He was under the law. They think that they can be as worldly as they want to be, and the Gospel will come in and make up what they lack and save them. Others view the Gospel as a divine provision from God, having as its main purpose the destruction of sin and the promotion of holiness. Therefore, far from making it acceptable for them to be less holy than they should be under the law, its whole value consists in its power **to make them holy**.

"Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you - unless you fail the test?" (II Cor. 13:5 NASB)

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