

Mistakes About Conversion

Joseph Alleine

Joseph was born in 1634 in England. In 1645, his brother Edward, a member of the clergy, died and Joseph asked his father that he be educated to replace his deceased brother. In 1649, Joseph entered Lincoln College and in 1651 entered Corpus Christi College. In 1653, he received his B.D. and in 1655 became the associate pastor at St Mary Magdalene, Taunton.

Joseph Alleine was ejected from the church in 1662 along with 2,000 other ministers. He was jailed several times for violating the Five Mile Act. Finally, in September of 1668, he passed on at the early age of 34.

Introduction

Dearly Beloved, I gladly acknowledge myself a debtor to you, and am concerned, as I would be found a good steward of the household of God, to give to every one his portion. But the physician is most concerned for those patients whose case is most doubtful and hazardous; and the father's pity is especially turned towards his dying child. So unconverted souls call for earnest compassion and prompt diligence to pluck them as brands from the burning (Jude 23). Therefore it is to them I shall first apply myself in these pages.

But from where shall I fetch my argument? With what shall I win them? O that I could tell! I would write to them in tears, I would weep out every argument, I would empty my veins for ink, I would petition them on my knees. O how thankful should I be if they would be prevailed with to repent and turn.

How long have I laboured for you! How often would I have gathered you! This is what I have prayed for and studied for these many years, that I might bring you to God. O that I might now do it! Will you yet be entreated?

But, O Lord, how insufficient I am for this work. Alas, with what shall I pierce the scales of Leviathan, or make the heart feel that is hard as the nether millstone? Shall I go and speak to the grave, and expect the dead will obey me and come forth? Shall I make an oration to the rocks, or declaim to the mountains, and think to move them with arguments? Shall I make the blind to see? From the beginning of the world was it not heard that a man opened the eyes of the blind (Jn ix 32). But, O Lord, Thou canst pierce the heart of

the sinner. I can only draw the bow at a venture, but do Thou direct the arrow between the joints of the harness. Slay the sin, and save the soul of the sinner that casts his eyes on these pages.

There is no entering into heaven but by the strait passage of the second birth; without holiness you shall never see God (Heb xii 14). Therefore give yourselves unto the Lord now. Set yourselves to seek Him now. Set up the Lord Jesus in your hearts, and set Him in your houses. Kiss the Son (Ps ii 12), and embrace the tenders of mercy; touch His sceptre and live; for why will ye die? I do not beg for myself, but would have you happy: this is the prize I run for. My soul's desire and prayer for you is, that you may be saved (Rom x 1).

I beseech you to permit a friendly plainness and freedom with you in your deepest concern. I am not playing the orator to make a learned speech to you, nor dressing the dish with eloquence in order to please you. These lines are upon a weighty errand indeed ? to convince, and convert, and save you. I am not baiting my hook with rhetoric, nor fishing for your applause, but for your souls. My work is not to please you, but to save you; nor is my business with your fancies, but with your hearts. If I have not your hearts, I have nothing. If I were to please your ears, I would sing another song. If I were to preach myself, I would steer another course. I could then tell you a smoother tale; I would make pillows for you and speak peace, for how can Ahab love this Micaiah, that always prophesies evil concerning him? (1 Kgs xxii 8). But how much better are the wounds of a friend, than the fair speeches of the harlot, who flatters with her lips, till the dart strike through the liver? (Prov vii 21-23 and vi 26). If I were to quiet a crying infant, I might sing him into a happier mood, or rock him asleep; but when the child is fallen into the fire, the parent takes another course; he will not try to still him with a song or trifle. I know, if we succeed not with you, you are lost; if we cannot get your consent to arise and come away, you will perish for ever. No conversion ? no salvation! I must get your good-will, or leave you miserable.

But here the difficulty of my work again occurs to me. '*O Lord, choose my stones out of the brook (1 Sam xvii 40, 45). I come in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel. I come forth, like the stripling David against Goliath, to wrestle, not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers, and rulers of the darkness of this world (Eph vi 12). This day let the Lord smite the Philistines, spoil the strong man of his armour, and give me the captives out of his hand. Lord, choose my words, and choose my weapons for me; and when I put my hand into the bag, and take out a stone and sling it, do Thou carry it to the mark, and make it sink, not into the forehead, but into the heart of the unconverted sinner, and smite him to the ground like Saul of Tarsus.*' (Acts ix 4).'

Some of you do not know what I mean by conversion, and in vain shall I attempt to persuade you to that which you do not understand. Therefore for your sakes I will show **what conversion is**.

Others are likely to harden themselves with a vain conceit that they are converted already. To them I must show **the marks of the unconverted**.

Others, because they feel no harm, fear none, and so sleep as upon the top of a mast. To them I shall show **the misery of the unconverted**.

Others sit still, because they do not see the way of escape. To them I shall show **the means of conversion**.

And finally, for the quickening of all, I shall close with **the motives to conversion**.

The devil has made many counterfeits of conversion, and cheats one with this, and another with that. He has such craft and artifice in his mystery of deceits that, if it were possible, he would deceive the very elect. Now, that I may cure the ruinous mistake of some who think they are converted when they are not, as well as remove the troubles and fears of others who think they are not converted when they are, I shall show you the nature of conversion, both what it is not, and what it is. We will begin with the negative.

Conversion is not the taking upon us the profession of Christianity.

Christianity is more than a name. If we will hear Paul, it does not lie in word, but in power (1 Cor iv 20). If to cease to be Jews and pagans, and to put on the Christian profession, had been true conversion — as this is all that some would have to be understood by it — who better Christians than they of Sardis and Laodicea? These were all Christians by profession, and had a name to live only; but because they had a name, they are condemned by Christ, and threatened to be rejected (Rev iii 14-16). Are there not many that name the name of Lord Jesus, that do not depart from iniquity (2 Tim ii 19), and profess they know God, but in works deny Him? (Ti i 16). And will God receive these for true converts? What! converts from sin, when they still live in sin? It is a visible contradiction. Surely, if the lamp of profession would have served the turn, the foolish virgins had never been shut out (Mt xxv 12). We find not only professing Christians, but preachers of Christ, and wonder-workers, rejected, because they are evil-workers (Mt vii 22-23).

Conversion is not putting on the badge of Christ in baptism. Ananias and Sapphira, and Simon Magus were baptized as well as the rest. How many make a mistake here, deceiving and being deceived; dreaming that effectual grace is necessarily tied to the external administration of baptism, so that every baptized person is regenerated, not only sacramentally, but really and properly. Hence men fancy that because they were regenerated when baptized, they need no farther work. But if this were so, then all that have been baptized must necessarily be saved, because the promise of pardon and salvation is made to conversion and regeneration (Acts iii 19; Mt xix 28). And indeed, were conversion

and baptism the same, then men would do well to carry but a certificate of their baptism when they died, and upon sight of this there were no doubt of their admission into heaven.

In short, if there is nothing more to conversion, or regeneration, than to be baptized, this will fly directly in the face of that Scripture, Mt vii 13-14, as well as multitudes of others. If this is true, we shall no more say, '*Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way*' for if all that are baptized are saved, the door is exceeding wide, and we shall henceforth say, 'Wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth unto life.' If this is true, thousands may go in abreast; and we will no more teach that the righteous are scarcely saved, or that there is need of such a stir in taking the kingdom of heaven by violence, and striving to enter in (1 Pet iv 18; Mt xi 12; Lk xiii 24). Surely, if the way be so easy as many suppose, that little more is necessary than to be baptized and to cry out, 'Lord, have mercy', we need not put ourselves to such seeking, and knocking, and wrestling, as the Word requires in order to salvation. Again, if this is true, we shall no more say, '*Few there be that find it*'; we will rather say, 'Few there be that miss it.' We shall no more say, that of many that are called, only '*few are chosen*' (Mt xxii 14), and that even of the professing Israel but a remnant shall be saved (Rom ix 27). If this doctrine is true, we shall no more say with the disciples, '*Who then shall be saved?*' but rather, 'Who then shall not be saved?' Then, if a man be baptized, though he is a fornicator, or a railer or covetous, or a drunkard, yet he shall inherit the kingdom of God! (1 Cor v 11 and vi 9, 10).

But some will reply, 'Such as these, though they received regenerating grace in baptism, are since fallen away, and must be renewed again, or else they cannot be saved.'

I answer, 1. There is an infallible connection between regeneration and salvation, as we have already shown. 2. Then man must be again born again, which carries a great deal of absurdity in its face. We might as well expect men to be twice born in nature as twice born in grace! But, 3. and above all, this grants the thing I contend for, that whatever men do or pretend to receive in baptism, if they are found afterwards to be grossly ignorant, or profane, or formal, without the power of godliness, they '*must be born again*' (Jn iii 7) or else be shut out of the kingdom of God. So then they must have more to plead for themselves than their baptismal regeneration.

Well, in this you see all are agreed, that, be it more or less that is received in baptism, if men are evidently unsanctified, they must be renewed by a thorough and powerful change, or else they cannot escape the damnation of hell. '*Be not deceived; God is not mocked.*' Whether it be your baptism, or whatever else you pretend, I tell you from the living God, that if any of you be a prayerless person, or a scoffer, or a lover of evil company (Prov xiii 20), in a word, if you are not a holy, strict, and self-denying Christian, you cannot be saved (Heb xii 14; Mt xv 14).

Conversion does not lie in moral righteousness. This does not exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, and therefore cannot bring us to the kingdom of God (Mt v 20). Paul, while unconverted, touching the righteousness which is in the law was blameless (Phil iii 6). The Pharisee could say, 'I am no extortioner, adulterer, unjust', etc. (Lk xviii 11). You must have something more than all this to show, or else, however you may justify yourself, God will condemn you. I do not condemn morality, but I warn you not to rest in it. Piety includes morality, as Christianity does humanity, and as grace does reason; but we must not divide the tables.

Conversion does not consist in an external conformity to the rules of piety. It is manifest that men may have a form of godliness, without the power (2 Tim iii 5). Men may pray long (Mt xxiii 14), and fast often (Lk xviii 12), and hear gladly (Mk vi 20), and be very forward in the service of God, though costly and expensive (Is i 11), and yet be strangers to conversion. They must have more to plead for themselves than that they go to church, give alms, and make use of prayer, to prove themselves sound converts. There is no outward service but a hypocrite may do it, even to the giving of all his goods to feed the poor, and his body to be burned (1 Cor xiii 3).

Conversion is not the mere chaining up of corruption by education, human laws or the force of affliction. It is too common and easy to mistake education for grace; but if this were enough, who a better man than Jehoash? While Jehoiada, his uncle, lived, he was very forward in God's service, and calls upon him to repair the house of the Lord (2 Kgs xii 2, 7). But here was nothing more than good education all this while; for when his good tutor was taken away he appears to have been but a wolf chained up, and falls into idolatry.

In short, **conversion does not consist in illumination or conviction or in a superficial change or partial reformation.** An apostate may be an enlightened man (Heb vi 4), and a Felix tremble under conviction (Acts xxiv 25), and a Herod do many things (Mk vi 20). It is one thing to have sin alarmed only by convictions, and another to have it crucified by converting grace. Many, because they have been troubled in conscience for their sins, think well of their case, miserably mistaking conviction for conversion. With these, Cain might have passed for a convert, who ran up and down the world like a man distracted, under the rage of a guilty conscience, till he stifled it with building and business. Others think that because they have given up their riotous ways, and are broken off from evil company or some particular lust, and are reduced to sobriety and civility, they are now real converts. They forget that there is a vast difference between being sanctified and civilized. They forget that many seek to enter into the kingdom of heaven, and are not far from it, and arrive to the almost of Christianity, and yet fall short at last. While conscience holds the whip over them, many will pray, hear, read, and forbear their delightful sins; but no sooner is the lion asleep than they are at their sins again. Who more religious than the Jews when God's hand was upon them? Yet no sooner was the affliction over, than they forgot God. You

may have forsaken a troublesome sin, and have escaped the gross pollutions of the world, and yet in all this not have changed your carnal nature.

You may take a crude mass of lead and mould it into the more comely proportion of a plant, and then into the shape of an animal, and then into the form and features of a man; but all the time it is still lead. So a man may pass through various transmutations, from ignorance to knowledge, from profanity to civility, then to a form of religion, and all this time he is still carnal and unregenerate, his nature remains unchanged.

Hear then, O sinners, hear as you would live. Why should you willfully deceive yourselves, or build your hopes upon the sand? I know that he will find hard work that goes to pluck away your hopes. It cannot but be unpleasant to you, and truly it is not pleasing to me. I set about it as a surgeon when about to cut off a mortified limb from his beloved friend, which of necessity he must do, though with an aching heart. But understand me, beloved I am only taking down the ruinous house, which otherwise will speedily fall of itself and bury you in the ruins, that I may build it fair, strong, and firm for ever. The hope of the wicked shall perish (Prov xi 7). And had you not better, O sinner, let the Word convince you now in time, and let go your false and self-deluding hopes, than have death open your eyes too late, and find yourself in hell before you are aware? I should be a false and faithless shepherd if I should not tell you, that you who have built your hopes upon no better grounds than these before mentioned, are yet in your sins. Let conscience speak. What have you to plead for yourselves? Is it that you wear Christ's livery; that you bear His name; that you are a member of the visible church; that you have knowledge in the points of religion, are civilized, perform religious duties, are just in your dealings, have been troubled in conscience for your sins? I tell you from the Lord, these pleas will never be accepted at God's bar. All this, though good in itself, will not prove you converted, and so will not suffice to your salvation. O look to it, and resolve to turn speedily and entirely. Study your own hearts; do not rest till God has made thorough work with you; for you must be other men, or else you are lost men.

But if these persons come short of conversion, what shall I say of the profane person? It may be he will scarcely cast his eyes on, or lend his ear to this discourse; but if there be any such reading, or within hearing, he must know from the Lord that made him, that he is far from the kingdom of God. May a man keep company with the wise virgins, and yet be shut out; and shall not a companion of fools much more be destroyed? May a man be true in his dealings, and yet not be justified before God? What then will become of you, O wretched man, whose conscience tells you that you are false in your trade and false to your word? If men may be enlightened and brought to the external performance of holy duties, and yet go down to perdition for resting in them and sitting down on this side of conversion; what will become of you, O miserable families that live without God in the world? What will become of you, O wretched sinners, with whom God is scarcely in all your thoughts; that are so ignorant that you cannot pray, or so

careless that you will not? O repent and be converted, break off your sins by righteousness. Away to Christ for pardoning and renewing grace. Give up yourselves to Him, to walk with Him in holiness, or you shall never see God. O that you would heed the warnings of God! In His name I once more admonish you. Turn ye at my reproof. Forsake the foolish, and live. Be sober, righteous, and godly. Wash your hands, ye sinners; purify your hearts, ye double-minded. Cease to do evil, learn to do well (Prov i 23 and ix 6; Ti ii 12; Jas iv 8; Is i 16-17). But if you will go on, you must die.

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