

THE DOCTRINE OF CONVERSION: SOME REFLECTIONS

METHODISM claims to have recovered elements in the gospel which are ever in danger of being thrust into the background. Among them is the doctrine of conversion, and there is no doubt that wherever Methodism has taken root, conversion in the sense of a conscious response to the call of God in Christ, awakened and sustained by the Holy Spirit, is held to be an indispensable condition of the Christian life. Although sudden or catastrophic conversions were a marked feature of the history of Methodism in its various branches, the central emphasis of the Methodist tradition is not upon the manner of the change, but upon the encounter of the individual with God and the glad commitment to His will. In recent years, chiefly as the result of a rediscovery of the place of the Church in the gospel, increasing attention has been directed to the importance of adequate preparation for Church membership. There are no ministers, we may hope, today who present candidates for church membership uninstructed in the Christian Faith. But it would be completely out of harmony with the Methodist ethos to make reception into membership, however crucial that step may be, a substitute for conversion. It would also be quite alien to Methodism to regard conversion as rendering unnecessary incorporation into the life of the visible Church. To answer the call of God as it comes to us in the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is to be in the Church, the fellowship of the redeemed. Conversion is individual and corporate, and it finds its fulfilment in fellowship in worship and life within the Christian community. But Methodism has always taught that the call must be answered by the individual, since God as He is encountered throws a man back upon himself. To respond to divine love as responsible beings whom God has addressed is to be delivered from the isolation of pride and self-interest and to find our peace in the family of God.

I

If by conversion we are to understand the response of the whole personality to God as He has made Himself known to us in Christ, the doctrine has a sure foundation in the Bible. That the words 'conversion' and 'convert' are rare in the English versions should not blind us to the fact that the thing itself is pivotal to Old and New Testament theology and religion. The biblical conception of conversion can best be understood in the light of biblical teaching about repentance. The Old Testament idea of repentance is expressed by the words 'turn' and 'turn back'. Repentance is a turning back to where we belong and may be likened to the return of a disloyal subject to the allegiance of his rightful sovereign or of a faithless wife to her husband or of idolaters to the worship of the true God. It involves something more than a change of mind. It is a deliberate change of attitude manifested in a new way of life (Isa. 55,; Ezek. 18₃₀ff.; Hosea, esp. Chap. 14). Conversion embraces not only repentance, but faith. No man can turn to God without faith, and faith cannot be exercised without turning away from ourselves to God. Repentance and faith, however, are of God. Sometimes the prophets speak as though repentance were simply

the result of an act of will (e.g. Ezek. 18₃₁). But there are other passages which must be placed alongside those that appear to be Pelagian in outlook (e.g. Isa. 44₂₂; Jer. 31₁₈; Ezek. 36₂₆; Ps. 51). Here it is God who bestows the grace of repentance. He alone can cleanse the heart.

Jesus reiterated the call to repentance sounded by John the Baptist and confirmed it by His baptism. He made repentance and belief in the Gospel the condition of entry into the Kingdom, and with Him, repentance and faith were inseparable (Mark 1₁₅). The significance and consequences of conversion in the New Testament are illustrated by the terms 'justification', 'dying and rising', 'regeneration', 'renewal', 'adoption', 'darkness and light', 'a new creation', 'a new man'. These terms bring out the divine initiative in conversion, for all is of God, who sets us in a new relationship to Himself in Christ. United to Him, we die to self and rise to the life of perfect obedience to the divine will. Thus we become new creatures; we are born again into the family of God and share in all its wealth of love; and we know that we have passed from darkness to light, for the new life in Christ is not so like the old life that is centred in self that we are unconscious of the transition.

These key words which sum up the biblical teaching about conversion indicate that the religion of both the Old and New Testaments is a religion of crisis. The Bible is the story of the meeting of God and man, which is the essence of worship and ethics. Throughout the biblical story the emphasis is on the priority of grace. The God of the Hebrews is a living God. He is on the highroad of history, visiting and redeeming His people. He called to His service those whom nobody wanted and He entered into a covenant with them. Their response determined their destiny. The call was associated with a great deliverance from Egypt, and that particular event was the focus of their worship as well as of their conduct. God, again, calls the prophets to turn to Him. They are confronted by God at a particular time and presented with His absolute claims. The gospel itself is a proclamation of crisis: the kingdom of God is at hand. A new situation had arisen and the gift of an imperishable life was freely offered. Jesus, however, was not a peaceable preacher of the comfortable doctrines of divine fatherhood and human brotherhood who invited people to explore at their leisure the meaning of His message. There was a note of urgency in the question: What think ye of Christ? When Jesus sent messengers on an evangelistic campaign, He told them to challenge those whom they met with the fact that God had spoken and taken action. Their preaching was to be a judgement as well as an offer of salvation. It was to be an appeal for a verdict and for the kind of penitence that not only says, 'I will arise and go to my father', but goes forthwith.

II

Certain aspects of the response to God described as conversion should be taken into account.

(i) Whether conversion is 'gradual' or 'sudden' is a matter of secondary importance which does not affect its validity or permanence. We are not justified in setting a premium upon sudden or gradual conversions. The danger perhaps today is that we should rule out all expectation of sudden conversions and invest the spiritual capital of the Church in an evolutionary process which, as is

confidently believed, will culminate in the Christian character. Some conversions in the modern Church are in fact so gradual that it is not obvious that anything is taking place at all. Although Christian training in the home or the Church should not be designed to precipitate emotional crises or to make all conversions conform to one type, it should be borne in mind that for those whose background is Christian as well as for those who are outside the Church, conversion is an act of turning to God. It is for all a conscious act, for it involves a decision about a Person who comes with the gift of a new life and makes absolute demands upon His followers.

No one would wish to dispute the influence of unconscious processes in the development of the Christian life or the reality of what is gathered up in the phrase 'unconscious religion'. Clearly there are many people who are not far from the kingdom of God even if they are not aware of being anywhere in the vicinity. Conversion, however, involves a decision for which personal responsibility is taken. This does not imply that the stress and strain which characterized the experience of Saul of Tarsus, Augustine, Luther, Bunyan, Wesley should be either expected or, so to speak, organized. And yet, for all who would share in the fulness of the Christian life, conscious commitment is essential. It is the high purpose of baptism, reception into Church membership or confirmation, and Holy Communion to prepare the way for and nurture the experience of reconciliation to God and His redeeming love in Christ. The act of commitment is admittedly the beginning only of the Christian life. In a sense, conversion is a daily process—a constant turning and re-turning to God which has as its goal complete union with God, 'that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify Thy holy name'.

(ii) Although feeling as a mental function plays its part in conversion, we have to beware of attempting to stereotype religious emotion or of seeming to imply that a particular type of feeling is an invariable accompaniment of conversion. Acting on this mistaken assumption, many have tried to engineer the orthodox emotion and have come by, not conversion, but disillusionment. Conversion is not a state of feeling, and if our main concern were the movement of our whole being toward God as He has manifested Himself to us in Christ, our feelings would look after themselves. To say that what Methodism teaches is salvation by feeling is base misrepresentation, but we might well avoid providing even seeming justification for such a travesty.

(iii) The test of the reality of conversion is to be found in a sense of forgiveness, a growing sensitiveness to sin, a conviction that all sin can finally be overcome by the power of God, an assurance that we are on the right road and that our life is in the hands of divine love, a changed relationship to our fellows revealed in social justice, the pursuit of peace, compassion, patience, humility and absence of self-concern, and a deepening allegiance to the Church as the people of God.

III

The prevalence of personal frustration indicates that the moral and spiritual conflicts to which the literature of conversion bears witness are still with us. It is widely recognized, even in some quarters which are generally far from orthodox in matters of religious belief, that the root cause of many maladjustments

is spiritual, and that if inner unity is to be secured man must turn away from himself to God. We tend to ignore in religious teaching what is perhaps unhappily described as original sin or the tendency to put ourselves in the centre of every picture and create life in our own image. Hence there arises a conflict so graphically portrayed in the biblical story of our first parents between the absolute claims of God and the absolute claims of man which are the fruit of self-deception. Conversion involves self-knowledge, and self-knowledge brings with it a sense of sin—a recognition that through bribing the jury and turning our conscience into our accomplice we have sought to put ourselves in the place of God. The sense of sin is an indispensable condition of spiritual development and its absence is a sign of abnormal personality. But self-knowledge and the sense of sin come from the vision of God and our willingness to lay ourselves open to its shattering revelations and follow where it leads. There must, we see once again, be a turning to God.

A significant corroboration of the doctrine of conversion is to be found in the philosophy known as existentialism. There are varieties of existentialism and it is doubtful whether in any of its forms it commands a substantial following. Born of disillusionment and of a loss of confidence in conventional religion, idealism and rationalism, it throws man back upon himself as Jesus did. It calls upon him to make a choice in a world in which—for the secular existentialist—there is no final security anywhere. Even the religious existentialist, who recognizes the claim of the absolute upon him, knows that he must act largely in the dark. Nevertheless, the existentialist holds that life means responsible choice which involves engagement and commitment. Perhaps the permanent elements in religious existentialism have never been better expressed than in Charles Wesley's famous hymn, 'Come, O thou traveller unknown'. The crucial lines are, 'Wrestling I will not let thee go, Till I thy name, thy nature know'.

It is the business of the Church to multiply the number of people whose lives have been transformed by the power of Christ, crucified and risen, and by the indwelling of His spirit. But no man drifts into the Christian life or finds himself within it unawares. Christ presents His call to the mind and conscience of every individual. To prepare the way for the right response to that call and to excite hunger for a life permeated by Christ in every part is the function of the Church through worship, preaching and teaching, the service of the community and the daily care of souls.

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