

## WHY I BELIEVE

### Conversion to Christ is Not Psychological

#### I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Every thinking Christian at one time or another has asked himself if he has been “duped” or “brainwashed” into believing in the Christian Faith. The Christian wonders whether his faith in Christ is a reality or some psychological experience based on an inner religious need which might have been filled in some other way. With so much atheistic psychology being propagated today, it is only fitting that we examine Christian conversion in light of the Bible and personal experience.
- B. The modern day skeptic would say that Christian experience is completely personal and subjective and has no objective, eternal validity. The atheistic or agnostic psychologist does not oppose the idea of religious conversion, for it is obvious that millions of people have claimed to have a religious experience. They know that Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Mohammadans, etc., have conversion experiences. There is even political and social conversions, for a person can be as committed to a political system as a religious belief. What secular psychologists oppose with a passion is the belief of Bible-believing Christians who claim their conversion to Christ is the only true and valid conversion and without this conversion no one is going to know God or go to heaven.
- C. It is not uncommon to hear some psychologist calling a true Christian mentally and/or emotionally disturbed.
- So strong is the prejudice in some quarters against the validity of Christian experience that academic degrees have been denied. A friend, studying in one of our best known universities, was denied a Ph.D. degree in social science. He was told, “Believing what you do about God, you are by definition crazy.” (Paul Little, Know Why You Believe)
- D. It cannot be denied that there are some mentally and emotionally disturbed people who call themselves Christians, but they are in the minority. The person who is mentally distorted in religious matters

will also be disoriented in all walks of life. The true church has been willing to help the emotionally disturbed because many psychological problems are due to spiritual needs. This is why there are many religiously unbalanced people in so-called Christian circles. However, to say that all Christians are mentally disturbed is foolishness, for the vast majority of Christians live normal lives and cope with the problems of life much better than most people. (I Thess. 5:14).

## II. PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR CONVERSION TO CHRIST

- A. Autohypnosis: Man, while he knows there is no God, wants someone greater than himself above him to help him in his problems of life. Man's mind is capable of great rationalization and he so wants a concept of a father-image in God that he convinces himself there is a God. NOTE: A so-called Christian wants to be converted to God so badly that he finally convinces himself of the Christian message and believes in Christ.

### OBJECTIONS

1. It would be possible for a person to have a psychological experience that was not Christian. However, the real question is who else has had a so-called Christian experience of conversion and how many? Millions have claimed to be converted to Christ with essentially the same experience. It is not likely that this many people experiencing the same Christ would have only a psychological experience.
2. Autohypnosis could be possible in some because there would be no objective truth that this subjective experience could be tied to. Yet, Christianity is a personal subjective experience tied into the historical facts of Christ's life, death and resurrection.
3. True Christian conversion comes when one really does not want it. Conversion is against the basic sinfulness of man.

- B. Psychological Crutch: Man has an inner need for security and he finds it in a concept of God. Religion is a spiritual or psychological crutch and some people need it to get through life. Christianity is basically for weak people who need something to bolster their confidence in themselves.

### OBJECTIONS

1. The Bible tells us that all men are weak because of sin and they are in desperate need of a Savior. Men need Christ because they were originally created for dependence on God. The Creator has made man a dependent creature. There are certain spiritual needs of men that only God in Christ can fill.
  2. Those who have turned to Christ in dependence have found purpose for life and their most inner spiritual needs have been met.
- C. Conditioned Reflex: Men who claim a conversion experience have been brainwashed, for their experience has been psychologically induced. This conversion was induced by repeated confrontation with the so-called gospel until one yielded, or under such highly emotional circumstances (as in a revival meeting) a person was conditioned psychologically to accept Christ and believe himself to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

This thinking has its roots in experiments by Pavlov, the famous Russian scientist. He placed measuring devices in a dog's mouth and stomach to determine the production of digestive juices. Then he would bring food to the dog and at the same time ring a bell. After doing this repeatedly over a period of time, Pavlov rang the bell without producing the food and the dog salivated as usual. The inference drawn is that by such repeated conditioning, the mind can be made to produce desired physical reactions. It is on this basis that we can explain all political, social, and religious conversions, say the proponents of this view. (Little)

### OBJECTIONS

1. To say that men react the same as animals fails to take into consideration that man has the ability to reason with the critical faculty of self-analysis, self-contemplation and self-criticism. Man is not an animal, and while he may have physiological similarities with animals, his psychology is certainly different.
2. Those who believe the explanation of conversion is found in the conditional reflex must ultimately and logically take a deterministic view of human behavior and eliminate all moral responsibility. All behavior is the result of conditioned reflex so that a person guilty of rape could say, "It was not my fault but my glands made me do it."

3. Christian experience in conversion disproves the whole conditional reflex conversion but they know they have been converted. The conditional reflex theory requires repeated stimuli over long periods of time but some people become Christians when they are first exposed to the gospel; others who are raised in a Christian home never become Christians. Men and women of all walks of life claim to have had this conversion experience – educated and non-educated, rich and poor, prince and peasant, successful and unsuccessful.
4. It is possible to manipulate human emotions and to induce psychological conversions that are not Biblical or Christian. This is done constantly by evangelists who let their imaginations run away with them when describing hell or they pick some emotionally charged story which produces either great sorrow or a feeling of well-being. It is quite possible to stir people's emotions but their wills are still not bent towards God. There is no genuine conversion until the whole man (will, mind and emotions) has been reached.
5. God may use various means to bring conversion but the fact remains a person is converted. Christian experience can be described psychologically but this does not explain why it happens nor do away with the reality of it.

### III. THE BIBLICAL EXPLANATION FOR CONVERSION

- A. Conversion is Historically Based: Christian conversion is a subjective experience but it is based on historical facts. Christ lived, died for sinner and was resurrected from the dead. He is alive today and He is in the hearts and lives of all who trust Him for salvation (Rom. 6:1-4). If Christ had not risen from the dead, we could not experience Him, but since Christ has risen from the dead, we can experience Him. The Christian can speak of his conversion in verbal form (not some mystical experience) because it is related to historical facts. NOTE: Men of other religions talk of conversion in that they begin to live a different kind of life, but is their religious experience based on any historical fact? It is possible to have religious conversion without having Christian conversion, for Christian conversion is towards the historical person of Christ.

Because Christ is really “there,” all the possibilities of His life within us are realizable. It is only half the story when we sing, “He lives within my heart.” The other crucial half is that we know He lives because he rose from the dead in history. Our personal subjective experience is based on objective historical fact.

- B. Conversion is Caused by God: The Bible is quite specific that conversion is caused by God and not by man. The final cause in a person's conversion to Christ is not man's faith but God's efficacious call to salvation (Rom. 8:28-30; II Tim. 1:9; I Cor. 1:9; I Cor. 1:23-24). Men are Christians because they believed in Christ but that belief was part of the sovereign plan of God. Conversion, therefore, is supernatural.
- C. Conversion is Real: It cannot be denied that the person who has trusted Jesus Christ, no matter what the attending circumstances, has experienced a changed life. Where once there was only a desire to please self and no genuine spiritual interest, now there are new desires for Christ and spiritual realities (Phil. 1:21; 3:8; II Tim. 1:12). Conversion can be described in psychological terms, for the total personality passes through a psychological process, but a change has taken place and that toward Christ. We came to love Christ whom we did not want because we loved self and sin more than Christ. NOTE: Children raised in a Christian home may at times have a problem with the reality of conversion. It is not that they are not converted but they see no dynamic change and question the reality of conversion. Sometimes children of Christian parents have to go astray for a while before they come to grips with the reality of conversion.
- D. Conversion Takes Away Guilt: All men have feelings of guilt about certain acts they do. A feeling of guilt when the moral law of God is broken is normal. Guilt cannot be rationalized away and only Christ can take away man's guilty feelings. All true Christians can testify that Christ alone has removed the guilt they felt for their sins.

Guilt must not be rationalized away. In Christ, there is an objective basis for forgiveness. Christ died for our sins; the sentence of death that belonged to us has been taken by Him. "There is therefore no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). Forgiveness at the personal level is a reality. (Little)

- E. Conversion Brings Purpose: A person who experiences conversion knows that Christ has brought peace and a new purpose for living (Eph. 2:14; John 10:10; Phil. 3:10). The Christian begins to experience power and freedom not previously known in his past life. Life takes on new meaning. NOTE: Let us assume for the sake of argument that Christian conversion is a psychological experience alone. Would you trade it for some other psychological experience? The Christ you know has brought you peace, purpose and joy. It would be better to go through life with this kind of psychological experience than no experience at all.

- F. Conversion Satisfies: Those who have experienced Christ through conversion have found the answer to life and death, and they desire no further religious experience except to know Christ better (Phil. 3:10). Men who have attained wealth, fame, success and power have not conquered loneliness. Even religion cannot satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart, but Christ alone can fill the vacuum in man.

The late Carl Gustav Jung said, “The central neurosis of our time is emptiness.” When we do not have money, fame, success, power, and other externals, we think we’ll achieve final happiness after we attain them. Many testify to the disillusionment experienced when these have been achieved and the realization sets in that one is still the same miserable person. The human spirit can never be satisfied “by bread alone” – by material things. We have been made for God and can never find rest until we rest in Him.

NOTE: Those who have found Christ are perfectly satisfied with Him and desire no other religious experience. However, they are never satisfied with their lives but desire constant conformity to Christ.

- G. Conversion is Permanent: When one is truly converted to Christ by the sovereign workings of the Holy Spirit, that conversion is permanent because it is based on the supernatural workings of God (John 10:27-29). NOTE: If you question the reality of your conversion, try to stop believing in Christ! If you are truly converted, you cannot stop believing in Christ no matter how hard you may try.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

- A. While Christianity is the only religion in the world based on certain historical facts, it does not become a reality until one receives Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The final criterion that Christianity is true is the reality of the experience of those who embrace Jesus Christ.
- B. The challenge goes out to atheist and agnostic alike: “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psa. 34:8).

\*\*\* The basic content of this message was taken from the chapter “Is Christian Experience Valid” by Paul Little in Know Why You Believe.