

Chapter 1

Conversion: Its Nature

I. THE NECESSITY OF CONVERSION

It was an exaggeration, yet one which contained more of truth than of hyperbole, in which a late writer affirmed that the most characteristic thing this world has to show to other worlds is a scaffold on the morning of an execution. It is true that to a holy mind the distinctive idea in the condition of this world is that of *guilt*. It is not dignity; it is not beauty; it is not wisdom; it is not power; it is *guilt*. It is not weakness; it is not misfortune; it is not suffering; it is not death; it is *guilt*.

Any thoughtful observer, therefore, must believe that this world needs to be changed, in order to become the dwelling-place of God. No historian, with any just conception of man as he has been and is on the theatre of nations, doubts this. No philosopher with any knowledge of God as he is, doubts this. No man, with any honest insight into his own heart, doubts this necessity of change, to fit man for the presence of God. A seraph hovering over the field of Solferino could scarcely feel a more appalling conviction of this necessity than any individual sinner feels, when his own heart and the idea of God are revealed to his conscience side by side.

Such has been the general belief of the race. They are the few maniacs who have denied it. The great religious systems of the world have been founded upon the conviction that man must be changed. Be the gods what they may, man must be changed, to be at peace with any deity. Our blinded and sickened race has sought to change itself by most laborious and cunning devices. Remorse has been the equivalent of genius in its inventions. By baptismal rites, by anointings, by branding with mysterious symbols, by incantations of magic, by sacred amulets, by ablutions in consecrated rivers; by vigils and abstinences and flagellations, and the

purgative of fire; by distortions of conscience in rites of which it is a shame to speak; and by that saddest of all human beliefs, which would doom a human spirit to migrate for millions of years through metamorphoses of bestial and reptile existence,— man has struggled to change himself, that he might be prepared to dwell at last under the pure eye of God. Even those fools who have said in their heart, there is no personal God, have drifted unconsciously in their speculations upon a caricature indeed, and yet a resemblance of this very faith in man's need of a change to make him worthy of the divinity which is within him.

It is impressive to observe how Pantheism, in its wildest freaks, is dragged towards a doctrine of regeneration. The idea haunts it. It speaks in language which a Christian preacher need not refuse in describing the phenomenon of conversion. Its apostles tell us of a certain stage in individual history at which the soul must awake and “bestir itself, and struggle as if in the throes of birth”; that it must “wrestle with doubt, or cower trembling under the wings of mystery”; that it must “search heaven and earth for answers to its questions”; that it must “turn in loathing from the pleasures of sense,” under its “irrepressible longings after the good, the true, the beautiful; after freedom, immortality.” They tell us of the tumult and torment of this “crisis of internal life.” They profess to inform us how the soul may make its way out of this chaos of distress into a “noble, perfect manhood”; how, as one has expressed it, the soul may “once more feel around it the fresh breath of the open sky, and over it the clear smile of heaven; how the streams of thought may again flow on in harmony; how content is to be regained with one's position in the system of things; how all fear and torment are to give place to blessedness; how love is again to suffuse the world, and over every cloud of mystery, to be cast a bow of peace.”

Thus, I repeat, the idea of regeneration haunts philosophy in its most impious departures from God. With a God, or without a God, philosophy cannot get away from the sense of the necessity of a change in man to fit him for something to which he is predestined. Put into the language of any philosophy on this subject the two ideas of the Holy Spirit and of sin, and a Christian preacher may adopt the whole of it in his delineation of conversion.

This necessity, therefore, of some great, critical, formative change in man, may be assumed as a truth on which the mind of the race is sub-

stantially a unit. On this theme, as on many of the first principles of religion, the wanderings of the human mind from God are forever checked by oceanic currents which draw it inward, and compel it to sail along the coast of truth, never far or long out of sight of the mainland.

What, then, is the nature of that change which man needs to render him an object of divine complacency? Our dependence upon the word of God for the answer is immediate and absolute. Philosophy, independently of the scriptures, has taught the world almost nothing with regard to it. Even theological standards, uninspired, have added nothing to the wisdom of an awakened conscience in a child, except as they have translated the declarations of the word of God. We all wish to know, on a subject like this, not so much what philosophers or theologians have believed as what God has said.

II. BIBLICAL EMBLEMS OF CONVERSION

It will be instructive, then, to recall briefly certain of the representative passages of the Bible which set forth the nature of conversion.

The most familiar of these represent religious conversion by the change which occurs in natural birth. One can almost feel the fascination of the calm, subdued authority with which our Lord taught to his timid pupil the paradox of regeneration: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Birth of body — birth of soul! The one stands over against the other, as if for the sake of reflecting each by its resemblance to the other. Then, to check the astonishment excited by the seeming extravagance of his speech, he adds: "Marvel not that I said, Ye must be *born* again." "Marvel not" — this is no cause for dumb amazement; it is but one of the rudiments of truth. Art thou a master in Israel, and knowest not this thing?

A similar boldness of imagery is manifest in that class of passages which represent religious conversion under the figure of a change from death to life. As if birth from non-existence were too natural an emblem to express the whole truth of the anomalous change effected by regeneration, we hear an apostle exclaiming "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead." "You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses

and sins.” Another, in the assurance of a regenerate experience, declares “We know that we have passed from *death* unto *life*.” Conceive what intensity of significance this metaphor must have had to those of the apostolic age, in which the miracle of resurrection from the tomb was a reality in current history, a fact of common fame!

A similar vividness of contrast is preserved by a third class of passages, which express conversion by the figure of passing from *darkness* to *light*. What is the force of such language as this? “Ye are a chosen generation;” he “hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.” “Ye were sometimes darkness.” Not in darkness only, but darkness itself. Night was the symbol of your very souls. “But now are ye light in the Lord.” Not in light, merely, but light itself

“Holy Light — offspring of heaven, first-born.”

The noonday is the emblem of your being. Among the most beautiful of the scriptural titles of the regenerate, are these: “children of the light,” “children of the day,” “saints in light.” Some of the most stirring exhortations to renewed men are founded upon this contrast in nature. “Cast off the works of darkness, put on light” — “we are not of the night” — “have no fellowship with the works of darkness” — “what communion hath light with darkness?”

The force of such language is not diminished by a fourth class of passages, which speak of conversion under the figure of a change in the most central organ of physical vitality. “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you.” “I will take away the stony heart.” “I will give you a heart of flesh.” “Make to you a new heart.” A new heart! To this day, what words of wisdom have we learned by which to express a regenerate state more intelligibly or more vividly than by these, which we breathe into the prayers of our children?

But perhaps the climax of the daring imagery of the scriptures on this subject is exceeded in a fifth class of passages, of a literal force, which represent God and Satan as the sovereigns of hostile empires; and the change which man undergoes in conversion is a transfer from the one dominion to the other. Paul did not scruple to affirm his commission to preach a gospel which should “turn men from the power of Satan unto God.” “The power of Satan!” This was no fiction of a distempered brain,

in an age when demoniacal possession was a common and an acknowledged form of bodily affliction. "The Father hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son." "The power of darkness!" This was no feeble image to the thought of an Oriental people, whose faith had filled the night air with demoniac spirits. "In time past ye walked according to the prince of the power of the air. But God, rich in mercy, hath quickened us, hath raised us up, hath made us sit in heavenly places, in Christ Jesus." "Walking according to the prince of the power of the air!" This was no mysticism and no hyperbole to the ancient faith, whose angelology peopled the elements with spiritual intelligences, some of whom swayed the atmosphere malignantly. "The kingdom of Christ" — "the kingdom of the dear Son" — "heavenly places in Christ Jesus"! These were conceptions of unutterable meaning to minds whose only ideal of government was that of absolute empire, and whose thought of obedience was wrapped up in that eternal idea of *loyalty*, in which self is forgotten, and the sovereign of the realm is all in all.

These passages may suffice as a specimen of the methods by which religious conversion is described in the style of inspiration. Yet no possible selection of proof-texts could be the strongest evidence of the scriptural doctrine of regeneration. The climax of proof of such a doctrine is that it pervades the system of biblical teaching. It is one of the constructive ideas of inspiration which are not so much here or there, as everywhere. It is pervasive, like the life-blood in the body. It is like caloric in the globe. If a tortuous exegesis evades it in one passage, it is inevitable in the next. Expel it from a thousand texts, and it remains in secret implications all along the interval pages between them. Wrench it away from every text in which theologians have found it, and its echo still reverberates from one end of the Bible to the other. We can get rid of it, only by flinging away the system of revelation in which it breathes — everywhere present, everywhere needed to complete the symmetry of truth, and, everywhere imperative as an oracle of God.

Our chief inquiry, therefore, should be: What does this language mean in which we are taught man's need of a change to render him a friend of God?

III. CONVERSION NOT A RITUAL CHANGE

The scriptural emblems of conversion represent a change of *character*, as distinct from any variety of change by ritual observances. No single conception of religious conversion is more forcibly suggested by the Bible than this — that it is a reality and not a form. If the sole object of the scriptures in their teaching of this doctrine had been to prevent mistake on this point, and to reprove the proneness of the human mind to degrade religious experience to a religious form, their language could scarcely have been more happily adjusted to its object. With this volume in our hands, we do not know how to reason with men who exalt ceremonial ordinances or formulae as substitutes for a change of heart. We must rank among the tokens of intellectual disease, we must regard as a degradation in a civilized mind, that taste which leads one to protrude a Christian baptism, or the imposition of consecrated hands, or the profession of a Christian creed, or communion with a Christian church, or the reception of the Lord's supper, in advance of that work of God's Spirit by which a sinner is born again. It seems like solemn trifling to debate on such a faith. "How readest thou?" is the only query by which we can suggest the remedy for the sickliness of such a mind. To the law and to the testimony! If the scriptural idea of regeneration be definable in any particular of its versatile exhibition here, it surely is so in this, that the change it portrays is independent of external form or symbol. It is an event in spiritual experience. It is a change in the man. The man — the vital, the immortal part of him — feels the change. He lives it. When we pass from this substance of the thing, to consider forms, ordinances, creeds, professions, as distinct from the thing, as its substitutes or its superiors or its constituents, we descend from realities to mimic play-things. These incidents to a religious life indeed lose their significance as symbols even. *They are symbols of nothing*. They are a forgery and a mummer.

In the nature of conversion there is nothing that we know of which should forbid its occurrence in a disembodied state. If we could know that probation encloses the intermediate state of the departed, we might conceive of regeneration in all its majesty as experienced in that land of pure spirits. Without a form to signalize it, without a whisper to proclaim it, there would be joy in heaven. When, therefore, men degrade the dignity of this change to that of an appendage to a ritual; when they

overlay its simplicity by imposing upon it burdensome and intricate ordinances; when they overshadow its delicate spirituality by building around and above it even the scriptural symbols which express it, we only speak the uniform language of the scriptures and of common sense, when we catch the tone of an apostle and say — “we do not know whether we have baptized — Christ sent us not for this — lest the cross of Christ should be of no effect.”

IV. CONVERSION NOT A CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

John Randolph, in a letter to a friend, written at a time when his mind was agitated by religious inquiry, speaks of a volume which he had then before him, and in which it was argued, he says, that “no man is converted without the experience of a miracle.” “Such,” he continues, “is the substance” of the author’s faith: A man “must be sensible of the working of a miracle in his own person. Now, my good friend, I have never experienced anything like this. I have been sensible, and am always, of the proneness to sin in my nature. I have grieved unfeignedly for my manifold transgressions. I have thrown myself upon the mercy of my Redeemer. But I have felt nothing like what this writer requires.” “It appears incredible that one so contrite as I sometimes know myself to be should be rejected entirely by infinite mercy.” Yet “I fear that I presume upon God’s mercy. I sometimes dread that I am in a far worse condition than if I had never heard God’s word.”

This extract illustrates the method in which minds not accustomed to the technicalities of a theological dialect will often interpret and misinterpret unguarded or confused speech respecting the doctrine of regeneration. It is the legitimate interpretation of any language which degrades conversion from the level of a moral change to that of a change in the constitution of a soul. I say “degrades conversion”; for, what do we mean by a constitutional change? As applied to a spiritual intelligence, a constitutional change is a change either in its essence, or in its susceptibilities, or in its executive powers. But a change in either or all of these is, in respect of the ends of moral government, of less profound significance than a change of character.

The world has been very slow in learning that *miracles are not the grandest disclosure of Omnipotence.*