

# Editor's Preface

This work by Austin Phelps goes back to a time when theology was not considered “heavy”. It contains an inspirational discussion about conversion, and sees faith as creating new possibilities and accomplishments. In modest, inspiring, but still powerful language, it puts forward many important ideas using a sensible, logical plan that helps the individual interact with God in his new spiritual life. As the title suggests, *The New Birth* views the concept of conversion as a momentous, singular event. Phelps discusses this concept in relation to the subjects of guilt, self-respect, ritual, laws, mysticism, regeneration, the power of truth, the role of the preacher, and responsibility. Phelps strikes just the right balance of advice, admonition, dogma and social commentary. His writing is almost poetic, yet also steady, careful, straightforward and compelling. One reviewer of the original edition had this to say about the book: “It is thoroughly practical, appealing continuously to the religious sensibilities of every reader.”

Austin Phelps (1820 -1890) was a Congregational clergyman who was also a famous author. Phelps’ books are generally speaking devotional, homiletical, and theological in character. *The Still Hour* was published in 1860 in both America and Britain, and became extremely popular, selling some 200,000 copies. He then published a number of works about the complex and varied tasks of a minister: *The Theory of Preaching; Lectures on Homiletics* (1881); *Men and Books; or Studies in Homiletics* (1882); *My Study and Other Essays* (1886) *Rhetoric; Its Theory and Practice* (1895). He also wrote articles for the *Congregationalist*.

We have kept the entire original text, and added an index. This book, originally published in 1866, was directed towards members of the ministry, Sabbath-school teachers, and his fellow Christians, whom he hoped would find useful information which would help them, either “in their own Christian culture or in their efforts to win souls to Christ”. He also sincerely desired that the book would assist in the individual’s conversion using the “calm reasonings by which they are accustomed to judge of truth in other things.”

PAUL DENNIS SPORER



## Chapter 1

# Conversion: Its Nature

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### 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.*

The material world contains more sublime displays of power than those of miraculous dignity. The sidereal universe, swayed by the forces of law, is a nobler work of God than that in which he said: "Sun stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou moon, in the valley of Ajalon." In the animal creation there is a grandeur of divine working which no miracle has stamped upon it. The government of animal nature by laws which make it as true to God's will as the line of a bee in its flight, or the swoop of an eagle from its nest, is a more illustrious expression of the divine mind than the piling up of the quails in the wilderness two cubits deep.

So, in the world of mind, law is itself a more majestic thought than that of the suspension of law. The government of an intelligent universe under the law of moral freedom, exhibits a more imperial reach of God's power than the government of such a universe outside of that law. The government of finite mind, speaking anthropologically, is a more august achievement than the creation of that mind. The idea of *character* is an advance upon the idea of *nature*. Character in a soul, conceived of as an effect of God's working, is a more sublime product than the make of that soul. Do you conceive of moral character as something in the constitution of a soul, like the grain of a piece of wood? By such a conception you abase the soul itself, for the purpose of moral government, to a level with a piece of wood. Do you define to yourself depravity as a viciousness ingrained in the very build of a spirit, like the knarl of an oak? By such a definition you precipitate the spirit itself, for the ends of moral government, to a level with the knarl of an oak. Do you imagine gracious affections as inserted into the very nature of a man, as one would infuse a new gas into the atmosphere? By such a fancy you degrade the man himself, for the intents of moral government, to a level with a gas in the atmosphere. Do you describe regeneration as an act which impregnates a sinner's being with a new power, as you would magnetize a piece of steel? By such a description you drag down a sinner's being, for the objects of moral government, to a level with a piece of steel. Omnipotence can no more rule the one than the other by a moral system.

#### *Conversion More than Miracles*

Is it, then, to be supposed that such conceptions as these underlie the scriptural emblems of that change which a sinner needs to render him an object of God's complacency? There is in these emblems a height and a depth, a length and a breadth, of significance, which such thoughts of

regeneration and its surroundings in the system of truth do not fill up, and fill out, and fathom to the bottom. By the side of such emblems these thoughts appear sensuous and materialistic. Nothing but a literal interpretation of the language of these emblems can bind them to the sphere of constitutional phenomena. The instant we leave their literal force, — that is, the moment we conceive of them *as emblems* of truth, — truth is buoyant within them. It springs up above the sphere of merely creative power, into that of moral empire, where God makes flexible to his will the immense populations of intelligence and of liberty which fill the universe with his own image. There, man is a man, and not a manikin. A sinner is a sinner, and not a wretch only. He is responsible, self-acting, free; responsible because self-acting; self-acting because free, and free because otherwise moral government over him is a fiction. Conversion being a change in the character of a free sinner, *regeneration*, in respect of its moral solemnity, is something other and more than re-creation. It belongs to another and a loftier plane of Omnipotence.

If anything, more than the natural interpretation of the Scriptures were needed to establish this view — that conversion is a change of character, as distinct from constitutional changes — two simple facts would corroborate this as the necessary interpretation.

#### *Conversion a Fact in Experience*

One is, that Christian experience proves no other than a change of character in conversion. Conversion is an experience. It is one of the most ancient and one of the most modern facts in the mental history of this world. Consciousness has taken cognizance of it in unnumbered hearts. Real life has proved it by innumerable tests. Yet no regenerate man knows anything of a re-creation of his nature, or a multiplication of his powers. No Christian is conscious of new faculties. None exhibits such in common life. A converted man thinks, reasons, remembers, imagines now; and he did all these before conversion. A regenerate heart feels, desires, loves, hates, now; and it did all these before. A new-born soul chooses, resolves, plans, executes; and it did all these before. The *chief subjects of thought are changed* — they are revolutionized. The prime objects of love and hatred are changed — they are *transposed*. The supreme inclination of the affections is changed — it is *reversed*. The *character* of the purposes is changed — it is transformed. In these respects, indeed, old things are passed away, and all things are new. But beyond

this, neither consciousness nor observation testifies to any other change. No other could add to this any weight of moral significance. The man could have been, so far as we know, no more a Christian, no more an object of complacency to God, no more at peace with his own conscience, if regenerating grace had been a solvent of his nature, and had reduced it to its elements, and reconstructed the man by an improved process of creation.

*Conversion a Reasonable Change*

The other fact is, that the unregenerate man cannot be made intelligently to feel the reasonableness of God in making salvation dependent on any other change in a sinner than a change of character. The way of salvation is urged upon the acceptance of men, in the Bible, as a reasonable way. God lays open the whole subject, as our Lord did to Nicodemus, as one which is susceptible of reasonable defence. It is to be presumed to be capable of seeming reasonable to an unregenerate mind. The revelation of the mind of God on the subject is addressed to an unregenerate world. Its appeal is to the good sense of men—that sum total of the intellectual virtues equipoised and symmetrical. “Marvel not”—“Come, let us reason together”—“Are not my ways equal? saith the Lord”—“What more could I do to my vineyard that I have not done in it?”—“O fools, and slow of heart to believe.” Such is the tone of inspiration in exposing its great organic truths to the test of reason.

But the theory of the necessity of any other change in a sinner than a change of character, as the condition of salvation, does not bear this scrutiny of the good sense of men. A sinner’s conscience does not respond to it reasonably; his reason does not respond to it conscientiously. Therefore, it does not deepen his conviction of guilt intelligently. If he reasons consistently upon it,—and some minds will reason consistently here, to their own hurt,—if he reasons consistently upon it, the inevitable inference from it seems to be that he has no responsibility respecting his soul’s salvation until regeneration has been performed upon him. I cannot rid myself of a sense of sin; guilt seems to burn within me, like an unearthly fire; yet in reason, with this view of conversion, I cannot see myself to be any more responsible for sin than for my shadow. I feel guilt to be my character, and the whole of it; but in reason, upon this theory, it seems to be my organism only. I feel the burden of sin as if I were its creator, and yet in reason, with this conception of it, it seems