The Work of the Holy Spirit in Conviction and Conversion

J. I. Packer

The Spirit focuses attention, not on himself, but on the Savior. He has a ministry of illumination through the Word that convicts us of the reality of Christ; a ministry that leads us to see our need of Christ so that we embrace him in faith and love; a ministry that keeps us prayerfully in touch with Christ and assured of salvation by Christ; and a ministry of oneness which connects us to Christ in such a way that his risen life flows into us and he ministers to others through us. The Reformers, Puritans, Pietists, and older evangelicals in the West understood this. They insisted that the only proof of religious experiences came from the Spirit of God. Through those experiences the men, women, and children concerned were being prepared for, and then pointed and led to, fellowship by faith with Christ as their Savior and Lord.

But today any experience of quietness replacing mental distress, hopefulness replacing depression, or behavioral order replacing behavioral chaos tends to be treated as a work of the Holy Spirit, even when no reference to Jesus Christ enters into it. On that basis, one would have to treat the experiences of Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic mystics, and the “altered states” of consciousness promised by North America’s New Age movement and sought by many through drugs as saving manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Some people actually do, but biblically this is incorrect. Religious experiences which keep people from seeking and finding Christ are sponsored by a spirit quite different from the Holy Spirit of God.

My focus is the work of the Holy Spirit in the experienced event of personal conviction and conversion. Conversion is a vital necessity. Without conversion, no one beyond the state of infancy who has ordinary mental powers can be saved.

Conversion is a much misunderstood subject. Some think it must be an intense experience, a rush of feeling associated with revivalist campaigns and choirs singing, “Just as I Am,” or accompanied by the experience some refer to as being “slain in the Spirit.” But some conversions are entirely unemotional.

Conversion involves much more than new feelings, and clarity about conversion is important. There are three issues regarding conversion that I will attempt to clarify: (a) the Spirit as the author of conversion; (b) the work accomplished by the Spirit in conversion; and (c) the means used by the Spirit in conversion.

The Holy Spirit as the Author of Conversion

The word conversion means “turning from one thing to another.” The concept of Christian conversion, according to the New Testament, is of turning from idolatry and sin to God through Jesus Christ. This turning is analyzed as repentance towards God—which means first a change of thoughts, then a change of ways. It is also analyzed as faith in Jesus Christ—which means a trustful commitment. This repentance and faith is the response that the gospel requires.

But fallen human hearts are gripped by sin. None of us have it in us by nature to take the gospel seriously and turn to God in complete trust. It often looks as though evangelism will always be an impossible task; that no one will ever respond to the Good News. But, thank God, that is not so! Many, in fact, do turn to God and are committed to him. How is this possible?

The New Testament explains it in terms of sinners being called. That is, not just told the truth about salvation, but led by God to embrace it as the truth, and to repent and receive Christ; after which they are “kept by the power of God.” Christian conversion, which is an act of man, is thus revealed as being also a work of God.

Conversion is an exercise of divine sovereignty. Psychologically, the discernment and the decisions are ours, yet God turns us to himself by his own initiative and power.

James I. Packer is Professor of Theology at Regent College in Canada, and a citizen of that country.
When we look back on our conversion, both Scripture and our own hearts tell us that we turned because we were turned. We came to trust the Lord because we were turned. We came to trust the Lord because God himself drew us to him. This explains why English-speaking Christians for more than four centuries have talked about “being converted,” as the King James Version also does, even though the Greek word for convict, epistrephō, is always used in the New Testament in the active voice. In this act of almighty grace, the Holy Spirit is the direct agent. He illuminates, convives, quickens, induces new birth, imparts repentance, and prompts the converted soul’s confession, “Jesus is Lord.”

Psychologically, conversions take countless forms. Some are quiet, some tumultuous. Some are quick and clear, occurring the moment the gospel is understood, others take years before faith in Christ is confidently professed. Some occur so early in life that there is no conscious memory of them; some are deathbed occurrences.

In ministering conversion to us, however, the Spirit makes our ways converge. Wherever we start, and whatever differences we begin with—racial, social, sexual, cultural, or religious—we all end up in the same place. We enter into the same relationship of faith and love with the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior and Master. The Spirit’s uniform success in bringing us all to this same joyful and peaceful state of mind and heart shows that the title, “Lord of grace,” which an English hymn gives him, is well deserved.

The Work Accomplished by the Holy Spirit in Conversion

The New Testament interprets conversion Christologically and pneumatologically—that is, in terms of starting life afresh with Christ through the Spirit. It exhibits conversion as an entirely new beginning, miraculous in the sense that you cannot account for it in terms of anything that preceded it. New Testament concepts used to delineate conversion include new birth; new creation; the quickening of the dead; sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection; and putting off the old self and putting on the new. These are startling images and are powerful in their meaning.

1. **New birth** (John 3:3–8) means a change in our way of existing so radical and far-reaching that the only adequate comparison is our emergence from the womb into a world unknown.

2. **New creation** (2 Corinthians 5:17) means a change of outlook and attitudes that is inexplicable in terms of what we used to be.

3. **Quickening the dead** (Ephesians 2:1–5) means the end of corpse-like unresponsiveness to God and the start of a relationship with God that is true human life.

4. **Sharing (literally, being “grafted into”) Christ’s death and resurrection** (Romans 6:3–11), that is, being crucified, buried, and raised with him (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 2:11–13, 20; 3:1), means a miraculous motivational change at the core of our being, which Scripture calls our heart. The essence of the change is that the character qualities that marked the perfect humanity of the Lord Jesus are now implanted in us. Our strongest inner drives are opposing, if not always fully overcoming, the sinful habits that previously mastered us. Our moral nature is made new and we find ourselves desiring to know, love, trust, obey, honor, and please our Savior—more than we desire anything in the world. Every lapse into sin makes us deeply miserable in a way that was never true before.

5. **Putting on the new self in place of the old** (Ephesians 4:22–24; Colossians 3:9–10) means embracing this new life of Christlikeness that God both prescribes and bestows.

All of this becomes reality “in Christ.” Union with him, across all boundaries of time and space, is the objective fact that produces these immense changes in what we are. When we speak of conversion, therefore, both the objective fact and the subjective results should be in our minds, for both are aspects of the one reality.

Conversion, thus appears as the most significant thing that ever happens to any human being. It makes God our focus, Christ our glory, the Spirit our life, and heaven our home forever. And it is the Holy Spirit himself who effects this union, who sustains it by his indwelling presence, who makes it fruitful in Christlike living, and who will one day finish his transformation by giving us new bodies to match our renewed hearts. The Puritan, Thomas Goodwin, said that it is the Holy Spirit who “takes all the pains with us.” This, and nothing less, is his work in conversion. It is for us who believe to wonder, to adore, and to know ourselves as new creatures in Christ. We need to make it our daily goal to live out, with the Spirit’s help, what has been wrought in us by the Spirit’s power. True conversion is known by the new quality of life that it produces.

The Means Used by the Spirit in Conversion

The Holy Spirit is truly God the evangelist: He brings sinners to conversion. He does this through a variety of means. The Western habit of theological abstraction might lead us to believe that the evangelists of the New Testament had no such means. But their means are evident in what they say and do. 

(a) **The preaching and teaching of the gospel** is the means by which the gospel is given to us. The Spirit uses the word, however worded, however spoken, however sung, to proclaim the gospel. The body of believers, the assembly of God, is the means by which the gospel is given to us. The Spirit uses the church, however much divided, however much divided, to proclaim the gospel.

(b) **The demonstration of the gospel** in the worship, fellowship, holiness, love, and good deeds of the church and Christian individuals. The Spirit empowers the church to do great things, all for the glory of God and the advancement of the gospel. The Spirit empowers the church to do great things, all for the glory of God and the advancement of the gospel.

(c) **Prayer** is the means by which the Spirit brings about the conversions of sinners. The Spirit empowers the church to pray, to pray for the conversion of sinners, to pray for the church, to pray for the world. The Spirit empowers the church to pray, to pray for the conversion of sinners, to pray for the church, to pray for the world.
VIDEO PRESENTATION

Ministry of the Spirit

Producers: Mike Quintana, Stuart Bennett

Narrators: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). To be his witnesses is the call of the church: to be his witnesses to the uttermost ends of the earth. And so his witnesses have gone—to Ecuador, Mexico, Nigeria, and Korea.

Just as on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit imbued power and boldness to the disciples, present-day apostles are being filled so they can take the gospel of Jesus to the world with a power and boldness that can only be described as supernatural.

Yet, for many, the supernatural represents a spirit-world filled with strange, frightening creatures. The idea of the spirit-world is nothing new in many places of the globe including, South America—Quito, Ecuador to be exact. There, the Holy Spirit touched the lives of Mario and Janette Torres.

Out of work and in debt, Mario and his wife had exhausted every physical means of solving their problems.

Mario: The truth is, it was an insurmountable situation: bitterness, arguments, lack of things in the house. In fact, we even went to see a witch doctor to see what she could do for us.

Narrator: When the spiritual answer never came, Mario and his wife turned to some people who claimed they could actually speak to God. That same day, they attended a church and were so moved by the Holy Spirit that they accepted Christ and were filled with his power.

Mario: I was afraid of it because we were all standing and praying and I felt as if my tongue was all tied up, as if it wasn’t me talking.

Narrator: Loaded with questions, Mario tried to sleep that night, but he was awakened every fifteen minutes with a new word from God that comforted, assured, and affirmed his salvation and new power in the Lord.

Mario: I finally said to the Lord, “Thank you for what you have done for me. Thank you for the answers you have given me.”

Narrator: Soon after that, Mario began to witness and the Lord began to work.