

Born Again



**What Does It Mean
to be Converted or
Born Again?**

By Dick Tripp

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Foreword

A great deal of discussion has been given to this all-important subject of how one becomes a Christian. Yet many people, including Christians, do not have a clear grasp of the subject, resulting in an inability to explain it to others.

At what point can a person say they are now a Christian? What are the steps involved? Is it an event or a process? Is it totally reliant upon the work of God, or does it also depend upon our human efforts?

This booklet seeks to address these issues, presenting answers from a biblical view. Opinions, no matter how strongly we feel about them, are not as valid as the ultimate truth God has presented in the pages of the inspired Scriptures. Dick Tripp clearly illustrates the what, who, why and how one can experience a spiritual birth. The testimonies of people, both past and present, help show its relevance and the steps required to experience this life-changing birth. I remember a young man I spoke to who had been going to a church for over two years. He said, "There must be something more", and asked, "What is it?" Also, another man on a ship who said he wanted to become a Christian but didn't know how. Could it be that you are like this or know someone who is?

I commend this book, praying that it will not only provide clear understanding but will be an aid in assisting people to enter the life-changing experience of being converted or born again.

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Introduction

The term "born again" has become popular in some Christian circles over recent years. Charles Colson, Nixon's "hatchet man", who went to prison for his part in Watergate, became a Christian through that experience. Today he is president of Prison Fellowship which has a Christian ministry to prison inmates around the world. He entitled his biography *Born Again*. Billy Graham has written a best seller, *How To Be Born Again*. The term has even crept into secular usage. Someone who has found a new lease of life may describe themselves as "born again". In some Christian circles the word is often associated with a more enthusiastic brand of Christianity. Thus, in popular thinking, we have some Christians who are "born again" and some who are not.

The term “conversion” has been around for a lot longer, and in its Christian usage describes that experience whereby a person changes from not being a Christian to being an active believer, whatever one may understand by that process.

The purpose of this booklet is to clear away some of the fog associated with the use of these terms. I will look first at the use of the terms in the New Testament. After all, if we believe that in some sense the Bible is a revelation of God and his purposes for us, it will be good to find out what he thinks about the matter. Then I will look at human experiences of conversion in order to clarify some of the misunderstandings that exist about it.

Conversion in the New Testament

The old Authorised Version of the Bible translates Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:3 as follows: **“except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”** The word in the original Greek of the New Testament that is here translated “be converted” simply means to “turn around”. It is the word used when Jesus turned around in the crowd. It is used 39 times in the New Testament. In 18 of those instances it is used in the sense of turning from sin to God. It implies a turning away *from* something and turning *to* something. For instance Paul, writing to the Christians in Thessalonica, says, **“you turned to God from idols”** (I Thessalonians 1:9). We could say that conversion in the New Testament means turning away from those things that are inconsistent with a relationship with God, and turning to God, giving him his rightful place in our lives.

This word is always used in the active sense (“to turn”) and never in the passive (“to be turned”). The expression **“be converted”**, in the above text from Matthew, is a bad translation. A good modern translation, the New International Version, reads, **“unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** Conversion, turning, or changing our ways, is what *we* have to do in the process of becoming Christians. It is very similar in meaning to the word “repent” in the Bible.

Being “born again” in the New Testament

Being “born again” in the New Testament refers to something *God* does when we turn to him with repentance and faith. The expressions “born again”, “born of the Spirit”, or “born of God” are used about 15 times in the New Testament of becoming, or being, a Christian. It is one of John’s favourite ways of describing a Christian, but Peter uses it twice and Paul once.¹ John tells us how a Jewish religious leader, Nicodemus, came to Jesus at night. He probably came at night because it would be unseemly for one in his position to be seen associating with Jesus, who was considered to be a stirrer by the authorities. In the discussion that followed, Jesus said to him,

¹ John 1:13; 3:3, 5,6,7,8. Galatians 4:29. I Peter 1:3, 23. I John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1,4,18.

“I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 1:3). The Greek word translated “born again” could equally well be translated “born from above”. What did he mean?

The Bible emphasises two things that God will do for us when we submit our lives to Jesus. The first thing he will do is to forgive our wrongdoing. Paul is fond of using the word “justify”, which is a legal term meaning that we are acquitted of all the charges against us—declared innocent. **“Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Romans 5:1). Jesus paid for our sins on the cross and now credits to us his own perfect righteousness. **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”** (2 Corinthians 5:21). A wonderful transaction!

The second thing that God does is to come in the person of the Holy Spirit to literally live within us, his Spirit uniting with our human spirit. This experience of receiving the Holy Spirit is what Jesus is talking about when he says we are to be **“born again”**. In fact he went on to call it being **“born of the Spirit”** (John 3:5,8). This experience is also spoken of as a resurrection, **“God...made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions”** (Ephesians 2:4); as receiving eternal life, **“God has given us eternal life”** (1 John 5:11); or as being recreated, **“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation”** (2 Corinthians 5:17). Before we receive the Holy Spirit there is a gulf between us and God. We are **“dead in...transgressions and sins”** (Ephesians 2:1). After we receive him we are united with him in an intimate relationship. We are “born” into his family—we have spiritual life—a new relationship with God, who is now “Father”, and a new relationship with other believers who are our “brothers and sisters”. We also have a new spiritual home which is “heaven”.

It is interesting that, whereas John and Peter use the metaphor of being born into God’s family for this experience of becoming a Christian, Paul prefers the idea of adoption. **“You received the Spirit of adoption. And by him we cry...Father”** (Romans 8:15—literal translation). The first metaphor emphasises our union with God, sharing his nature by his Spirit within us. The metaphor of adoption puts the emphasis on our legal standing, with all the rights and privileges we share as children of God.

This experience of reconciliation with God and transformation, through spiritual birth, is made possible for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was foretold 600 years before those events by the prophet Ezekiel, to whom God declared, **“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities...I will give you a new heart...I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees”**

(Ezekiel 36:25-27). It is not the turning over of a new leaf, but the receiving of a new life—not just a new start, but a new heart. As the American evangelist, Billy Sunday, put it, “A lot of people think a man needs a new grandfather, sanitation, and a new shirt, when he needs a new heart.”

It is not necessarily a change in our temperament, or our abilities. These come to us largely through our physical birth. Neither is it the addition of some new attribute. Rather it is an inner transformation springing from a new relationship with the living God. Its chief effect is on our motivation, goals and values. Ultimately, as we grow in that relationship, it can transform every area of our lives.

If you have found religion hard work, a bore, uninteresting, or merely a duty you feel you ought to do something about, then maybe you need to go back to the beginning. Plutarch told the story of a man who attempted to make a dead body stand upright. He tried various schemes of balancing, and experimented with different postures. Finally, he gave up, saying, “There’s something missing on the inside.” For the relationship with God to come alive, as Jesus said, “**You must be born again**” (John 3:7). The life must be given to us by God, we cannot generate it ourselves.

The necessity of being born again

You will notice that in his discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus stressed the fact that if we would “enter” or “see” God’s kingdom, we could only do it through experiencing this new spiritual birth. This is not a popular view, as it goes against man’s natural pride. We would prefer to do something *for* God rather than receive something *from* God. However, the Bible is clear that we can do nothing to earn a place in God’s kingdom. It is totally undeserved.

The story is told of a man in gaol condemned to die. The day before he was due to be executed, the governor handed him a pardon from the Queen. “You are free,” he declared. Opening his prison clothes and exposing his chest, he replied, “Look, I have got cancer. It will take me away in a few days or weeks at the most. If the Queen could take away my cancer as well as give me a pardon, then I would cheer up. I need both.” You and I are under the sentence of condemnation, as we have all broken God’s laws. “**There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**” (Romans 3:23). We are also suffering from a fatal disease with a nature that is infected by sin: “**The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?**” (Jeremiah 17:9). There is only one cure. God offers both forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit—a rebirth into his family.

The evangelist, D. L. Moody, who had a very effective ministry both in Britain and in the United States, on one occasion addressed a group of

church workers. After the meeting he was confronted by an angry woman who said, "Mr. Moody, do you mean to tell me that I, an educated woman, taught from childhood in good ways and all my life interested in the church and doing good, must enter heaven the same way as the worst criminal of our day?" "No, madam," said Moody. "I don't. God does. He says everyone who would enter heaven, no matter how good they think they are, or how well educated, or zealous in good works, must be born again."

Tom Skinner, converted gang leader, in his book *Words of Revolution*, put it like this:

You don't need Jesus Christ because you are a drunkard. You don't need Jesus Christ because you take drugs. You don't need Jesus Christ because you lie. You don't need Jesus Christ because you cheat on your income tax. No. You don't need Jesus Christ because you do bad things....Whether you have done any of these things is irrelevant. You need Jesus Christ because you were born without the life of God. That makes you a sinner. You don't have God's life in you.

Of course, the idea that we are sinners, separated from God, and needing reconciliation to him is in marked contradiction to the Hindu, Buddhist and New Age ideas that we are all part of "God" and that all we need is to become more fully aware of that. The Bible diagnoses our position as being somewhat worse than that and beyond our own capabilities of doing anything about. However, this offer of spiritual life is available to all who want to be part of God's family through what Jesus has done on our behalf.

A delightful story comes from Billy Graham's Crusade in Ohio in 1977. A doctor, who was trained as one of the counsellors, spoke to a 12-year-old boy who invited Jesus into his life at the end of the meeting. The boy's name sounded familiar to him, and when his mother came over, he knew why. He had brought the lad into the world 12 years before. The smiling doctor said, "God has allowed me to be present at both births." Jesus said, "**You must be born again**" (John 3:7).

How are we born again?

In Acts, chapter nine, we read of the dramatic conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the persecutor of the early Christians. This encounter with the risen Jesus transformed him into Paul the apostle, one of the most effective Christian teachers and evangelists of all time. Michael Green, Anglican clergyman, evangelist and adviser to the Archbishop of Canterbury, says of this experience:

While much of the paraphernalia of Paul's conversion was unique, four elements stand out which are present in every authentic conversion.

- *It touched his conscience. He knew he was kicking against the goads [Sticks used for prodding animals pulling a plough].*
- *It touched his understanding. He realised that the Jesus he was persecuting was the risen Messiah and Son of God.*
- *It touched his will. He came to the point of giving in to Jesus and beginning to follow him.*
- *It changed his whole life—his ambitions, his character, his relationships, his whole perspective on life.*

No conversion can claim to be real unless it embodies these four elements.

Conversion, or spiritual rebirth, must begin with an awareness of your need for forgiveness and for reconciliation with God. John Stott, renowned Anglican clergyman and writer, once conducted a questionnaire in his church in London. Amongst other things, he asked his parishioners what it was that led them to put their faith in Christ. Some admitted that it was not so much a sense of sin as that “life was a great burden and pointless”, or “purposeless”, or that they felt “unloved and unwanted.” But in answer to the question, “At the time of your conversion, what was your understanding of sin and guilt?” seventy-five out of one-hundred-and-five claimed to have been fairly clear. Here are a few examples: “I was fully aware that I was leading a corrupt life;” “I knew I was guilty before God;” “I was fully conscious of my sin and guilt;” “I had an acute sense of sin that sometimes led me to despair;” “I hated my shortcomings, which drove me to Christ.”

It is not necessary to believe that you are a terribly awful person! You may not be at all. However, it is necessary to accept the fact that you have come short of God’s requirements. If you don’t believe that, read through Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel, chapters five, six and seven! One person who had attended church for forty years—had sung in the choir, taught classes, given time and money, and visited the sick—told in a letter to *Decision* magazine how she had become aware that her heart was not right with God. She wrote,

I fell onto my knees and prayed, ‘Dear God, I’m lost. Please show me the way. Forgive me of my many sins. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.’ You see, I had never admitted I was lost. When I did, and asked God to forgive me, Christ came into my heart...My battle was won.

Secondly, there needs to be some understanding of who Jesus is. He is the crucified and risen Lord. He died for your sins and mine and now reigns in heaven until he will appear again to judge the world.

Thirdly, there needs to be a willingness to submit to Jesus as Lord of your life. However much your awareness of the need for reconciliation, and however much or little understanding you may have, the most important aspect of conversion, or spiritual rebirth, is the will. Are you *willing* to accept Jesus as Saviour and Lord of your life. It means giving up the right to live our lives just as we please. We were created for partnership with the living God. However, he is the senior partner in the relationship, and without submission and obedience we cannot experience and enjoy his love. William James said, "The crisis of self-surrender has always been, and must always be, regarded as the vital turning point of the religious life."

Some personal examples

The importance of this final point could perhaps be underlined by giving personal examples from the lives of several prominent Christians. Keith Millar, author of a number of significant books on Christian living, tells of his conversion as he sat in his car in the pinewoods country of East Texas in complete despair. He had been through training for Christian ministry in seminary, but had never known God personally. He says:

As I sat there I began to weep like a little boy, which I suddenly realised I was inside. I looked up towards the sky. There was nothing I wanted to do with my life, and I said, "God, if there is anything you want in this stinking soul, take it." ...There wasn't any ringing of bells or flashing of lights or vision; but it was a deep intuitive realisation of what it is God wants from a man which I had never known before, and the peace which came with this understanding was not an experience in itself. It was rather a cessation of the conflict of a lifetime. I realised then that God does not want a man's money, nor does he primarily want his time, even the whole lifetime of it a young Seminarian is ready to give him. God, I realised, doesn't want your time, he wants your will; and if you give him your will, he will begin to show you life as you have never seen it before.

Eric Delve, prominent British evangelist and now Anglican clergyman, tells how before his conversion his church life was "trotting along." He was reading some religious books. He says:

*It didn't help much. I started to say, "Lord. You've got to help me!" But I became aware that God was saying, "No I won't." God was telling me, "I want **you!** I don't want to do an emergency operation."*

Kenneth Strachan, who headed the pioneering Latin American Mission, and whose ministry changed the lives of countless people, came to faith in Christ during his junior year at college. At a Swedish Church, he had stayed after the service and knelt with a group of friends, first with the intention of

sneering at their earnestness, and then capitulating to the urgent plea to surrender. Next day he wrote to his mother:

I have meant to keep still about this bit of news but feel too glad about it to shut up. Last night (Nov. 30th—you can mark the date) R. K. Strachan gave up a losing fight and surrendered to Christ. The Bible seems new to me and God is with me to help me. I think I've never really been converted before.

Similarly, Arthur Glasser, missionary to China with the China Inland Mission and later Home Director of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, describes his conversion at a student conference in New Jersey in 1932:

My conversion experience at Keswick was quite overwhelming, with the issue of the Lordship of Christ crucial to my understanding of what it meant to be among his followers. My manner of life was completely transformed because of the awareness that I was no longer my own: I had been "bought with a price".

Whether our finding a real faith is as definite and dateable as those experiences described above, the issue is the same. We each have to face the question of whether our basic motivation in life is to live for Christ or for ourselves. The respected US Senator, Mark Hatfield, puts the issues clearly when he says:

I saw that for thirty-one years I had lived for self and decided I wanted to live the rest of my life only for Jesus Christ. I asked God to forgive my self-centred life and to make my life his own. Following Christ has been an experience of increasing challenge, adventure and happiness. Living a committed Christian life is truly satisfying because it has given me true purpose and direction by serving not myself but Jesus Christ.

I will let C. S. Lewis have the last word on this aspect of conversion with a quote from his book *Beyond Personality*:

Christ says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your money and so much of your work—I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth or crown it or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked...the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact I will give you myself. My own will shall become yours."

Popular substitutes for spiritual rebirth

There are three things in which people commonly trust in to make them acceptable to God, but which are no substitute for a personal acceptance of Christ as Saviour and Lord.

Religious observances

However important church membership may be as a means of growing in our faith, it is sadly possible to “ooze into church membership”, as the Episcopal clergyman, Sam Shoemaker, put it, without a personal relationship with God. We can know *about* God without *knowing* him.

This is dramatically illustrated in a story told by Bishop John Taylor Smith, one-time Chaplain General of the British Army. He was preaching on one occasion in a large cathedral on the necessity of the new birth. In order to drive the point home he said, “My dear people, do not substitute anything for the new birth. You may be a member of a church, even the great church of which I am a member, the historic Church of England, but church membership is not new birth, and ‘except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” The rector was sitting on his left. Pointing to him, he said, “You may be a clergyman like my friend the rector here and not be born again, and ‘except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” Also on his left was the archdeacon in his stall. Pointing directly at him, he said, “You might even be an archdeacon like my friend in his stall and not be born again, and ‘except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ You might even be a bishop, like myself, and not be born again, and ‘except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”

A day or so later he received a letter from the archdeacon who wrote: “My dear Bishop: You have found me out. I have been a clergyman for over thirty years, but I have never known anything of the joy that Christians speak of. I never could understand it. Mine has been a hard, legal service. I did not know what was the matter with me, but when you pointed directly to me and said, ‘You might even be an archdeacon and not be born again’, I realised in a moment what the trouble was. I had never known anything of the new birth.” He went on to say that he was wretched and miserable and had been unable to sleep all night, and begged for a meeting, if the bishop could spare the time to talk with him.

“Of course I could spare the time,” said Bishop Smith, “and the next day we got together over the Word of God and after some hours we were both on our knees, the archdeacon taking his place before God as a poor lost sinner and telling the Lord Jesus he would trust him as his Saviour. From that time on, everything has been different.”

It may be appropriate to emphasise at this point that baptism, though it is the outward sign of our forgiveness and identification with Christ in his death and resurrection, is not a substitute for the new birth. It is clear in the New Testament that the Holy Spirit does not tie himself to religious ceremonies. However important they may be, without repentance and faith, ceremonies alone cannot save us.

Culture

Good breeding, moral living, education and culture are no substitute for the new birth. These things are all right in their place, but consider the following illustration. Suppose I start ploughing a bit of land in the spring. I plough it lengthwise and crosswise, every day except Sunday. Once in a while I put a cultivator in and cultivate it. Then I harrow it. Then I roll it. I have been ploughing, harrowing, rolling and cultivating for months, and you come along and say:

“Tripp, what are you doing?”

“Doing! I am cultivating this bit of land.”

“Well, I should say so! I was around here last spring, and you were ploughing it then. What are you going to put in it?”

“Well, I am not going to put anything in it, but I believe in a high state of culture.”

Get the point? I cannot cultivate spiritual life I have not received.

Good works

It is easy to suppose that doing good deeds can improve my credit rating with God. Someone has likened this to teaching a caterpillar to fly by tying butterfly wings to its body! God’s first requirement is that I be reconciled to him by the process of rebirth. Good works that are pleasing to God are those that grow out of my relationship with him.

Two matters for clarification

Before looking at some of the results of spiritual rebirth, there are two matters of common misunderstanding which I wish to address.

Conversion—sudden or gradual?

If we are thinking in terms of the whole process of turning to God, from the time a person first consciously begins to seek God to that time when they know that they have found him, then the answer may be either sudden or gradual. The process may take years or happen in a relatively short period. One of the questions John Stott put to his church members in the

questionnaire was, "How long a period elapsed between the awakening of your interest and your conversion?" Only five claimed a really sudden conversion on the same day, and five more within a few days. Ten measured the period in weeks, twenty-seven in months and forty-three in years. The remaining fifteen could not remember, mostly because they had been born and bred in a Christian home.

In some contrast to this, it is interesting to note that in the book of Acts in the New Testament, which records the growth of the early church over a period of thirty-five years, most of the conversions appear to be of the more sudden nature. People heard the good news of what Jesus offered them and accepted it. However, we must remember that this was a first-generation church. People had not been raised in committed Christian homes.

However, whether this process is sudden or gradual is not the important issue. One woman, who shared faith in Christ with her husband, said, "I always tell people that I came to Christ with a big bang and Jim came with a slow burn." The real question is: *Has* it happened? At some point in each person's search for God, he gives them the Holy Spirit and they are reborn. This, by nature of the event, cannot be anything but sudden. Either we have received the Holy Spirit or we haven't. The Bible is clear about this. We don't have to know *when* it happens. The prominent revivalist preacher, Jonathan Edwards, who saw many people converted through his ministry, said, "Many are, doubtless, ready to date their conversion wrong." However, it is important to know that it *has* happened. I will explore this further when we look at the results of being reborn.

What about emotions?

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, the noted Methodist minister and writer, preaching at the City Temple in London, said:

What is wrong with emotion? If Christianity is falling in love with Christ, has anyone ever fallen in love without emotion? Can we imagine somebody advising a young lover in saying: "I would not marry her if I were you, you evidently feel too deeply about it." How could anyone come into contact with the living Christ and feel both His forgiving love and His relentless challenge without the very deepest emotion?

For some people, conversion can be an emotional experience. Having been privileged to sometimes be present with people who are taking the step of committing their lives to Christ, I observe that occasionally there are tears. Often there is more a sense of relief or even joy. However, for some it is a very unemotional decision. John R. W. Stott is described by historian David Edwards as, "apart from William Temple [who died as Archbishop of

Canterbury in 1944] the most influential clergyman in the Church of England during the twentieth century". Edwards, in the book *Essentials*, tells how Stott recalled the silent prayer he prayed as he knelt at his bedside in a Rugby School dormitory one Sunday night in February, 1938.

In a simple, matter-of-fact but definite way he told Christ that he had made rather a mess of his life so far; he confessed his sins; he thanked Christ for dying for him; and he asked him to come into his life.

The sincerity of that prayer was evidenced by the note that Stott wrote in his diary next day, "He has come into my house and now rules in it."

C. S. Lewis, when he admitted that God was God and first knelt to pray, described himself in his biography, *Surprised by Joy*, as "perhaps the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England." He describes his final step as follows:

I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. "Emotional" is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events. It was more like when a man, after a long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.

The Scottish clergyman, Robert McCheyne, wrote in his diary at a time when God was sending revival to his parish and there was much emotion present in the meetings, "If God saves souls in a quiet way I shall be happy; if in the midst of cries and tears, still I will bless his name." Two quotes from a Tennessee mountain preacher put emotion in the right perspective. "Today we go to the football game to do our shouting, to the movies to do our crying, and to the Church to do our freezing." "I don't care how high you jump or how loud you shout, as long as when you hit the ground you walk straight."

The results of being born again

The immediate results of spiritual rebirth can vary from person to person. We are all unique individuals and God deals with us according to our needs. For some there is an immediate sense of **being forgiven**. Oswald Smith, whose church in Toronto has sent out and supported hundreds of missionaries around the world, tells of his conversion at a meeting conducted by the evangelist R. A. Torrey:

Suddenly the tears began to flow and I knew without doubt that my sins were forgiven and I was a child of God for all eternity. There wasn't any particular

excitement, no sudden surge, just the quiet confidence that I would never have to wonder again about where I would spend eternity. I now had God and he had me.

A teenager, well hooked into the drug scene, who was converted during a Billy Graham Crusade in Minnesota, describing his experience, said:

I felt like loving everybody. It was like on a hot day and you are dirty and take a shower, only I felt the shower was on the inside and it was even more than just getting the mud washed away, it was like something else came in.

For some it is a sense of **peace or joy**. Philip Crothall, who has been working among Maori and Polynesian families in the Auckland suburb of New Lynn, wrote in *Challenge Weekly* of his conversion:

The immediate result was peace, and later a new confidence, joy and love for both God and other people.

Sir George Williams, founder of the YMCA, as a 16-year-old apprentice in London, was deeply moved by the gospel at a church service. He returned to the shop and knelt in prayer and submission. He later recalled:

I cannot describe to you the joy and peace which flowed into my soul when I first saw that the Lord Jesus had died for my sins, and that they were forgiven.

Russian author and intellectual, Marcinkowski, spoke similarly of “the deep indescribable quietness of eternity” and wrote, “an inexpressible joy brightened my soul.”

For some it is a sense of **being loved**. Susan Hainsworth ran away from home at 15 and got involved in the drink and drug scene. She attempted suicide three or four times. In *Challenge Weekly*, she told of her experience the day she decided to follow Jesus:

I remember walking out of the house and looking at God’s creation like scales had just fallen off my eyes. Everything seemed so clean and pure...The depression and hopelessness, that I had felt for so long, Jesus lifted off me...He enveloped me in his pure love, so different than the “love” of physical relationships. His love I know I can be sure of.

For others it is the sense of finding **meaning and purpose** to life. Actress Colleen Townsend Evans, on the verge of finding success when offered the “big buildup” by a head producer in Hollywood, tells how she found instead real purpose in Jesus. She found him in a quiet undramatic way at a Christian Conference:

I went for a walk and said, “God, if all this is true, if this is the answer and if you are the way, I just want to give my life to you...everything.” There were no voices, no visions, but that was the beginning. I walked along the road

that morning with a totally new life. Everything looked different, things smelled different, life was different, because I had found the meaning of life in the person of Jesus Christ.

Quite common is the experience of **seeing the world of nature, God's creation, through new eyes**. D. L. Moody, the American evangelist, says of his experience:

I thought the old sun shone a good deal brighter than it ever had before—I thought that it was just smiling upon me; and as I walked out upon Boston Common and heard the birds singing in the trees, I thought they were all singing a song to me. Do you know, I fell in love with the birds. I had never cared for them before. It seemed to me that I was in love with all creation.

Jonathan Edwards, styled by one critic as that “flinty-minded Calvinist”, tells of a similar feeling:

The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were a calm, sweet cast or appearance of divine glory in almost everything. God's excellence, his wisdom, his purity, and love seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees, in the water and all nature.

However, the presence or absence of such feelings is not the vital thing. One needs more than just feelings in order to maintain a commitment to Christ, especially when difficulties arise. Often awareness of the changes involved does not come till some way down the track. Singer Cliff Richard uses the following helpful illustration:

When you cross the border from Switzerland to Italy the scenery doesn't become Italian—it's still alpine in fact. It is only as you go further into Italy that slowly the snow gets left behind and the sun gets warmer and it becomes obvious you are in a different country. The border represents the moment of decisive change from one nation to another, but only as you press on into the new country can you expect to discover just how different it really is.

As a person presses on in the Christian life and seeks to grow in faith—by using the means he has given us such as reading the Bible, worship, fellowship with other believers, and daily seeking to serve God in the ordinary things of life—then changes will become apparent. The things one can expect to occur are a new love for the Bible as it becomes God's personal message to you; a growing love for God and for others; and a growing awareness of God's guiding hand in the circumstances of life. Theologian Jim Packer, in his book *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, says, “the only proof of past conversion is present convertedness”!

Perhaps one of the greatest evidences of spiritual rebirth is the growing awareness of the reality of the spiritual world and the presence of Christ. Robert Laidlaw, founder of Farmer's Trading Company in Auckland and author of the booklet *The Reason Why*, which has sold millions of copies around the world, wrote:

If I had to say in one sentence what my experience of being a Christian is, it would be quite simply a continuous consciousness of the presence of Christ in my life.

Paul describes this experience as being **"in Christ"**, a phrase he uses 164 times in his letters in the New Testament. He also describes it as having the **"eyes of your heart"** enlightened (Ephesians 1:18), or as having the **"light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ"** shining into our hearts (2 Corinthians 4:6).

In tropical waters lives the anableps fish. This fish has two pupils in each eye, an upper-storey pupil and a lower-storey pupil. The upper pupil is focused to see clearly in air while the lower pupil focuses in water. This fish can lie on the surface and see clearly in both worlds. Jesus called the Holy Spirit **"the Spirit of truth"**. If he has come into our lives, he will begin to give us second sight. We begin to see things as they *really* are. As Paul puts it, **"So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal"** (2 Corinthians 4:18). We begin to get a proper perspective on both worlds, the world of the spirit and the world of material things; the relationship between them and the relative value of each.

Final considerations

A young woman in Latin America came up to missionary and author Stanley Jones at the close of a meeting, and said, "You are happy with Christ; now show me how to be happy without Christ." His reply was, "I'm sorry, but I don't know how you can be happy without Christ. Can a railway train be happy without rails, the eye without light, the lungs without air, the heart without love?" Jones said, "Man is made for conversion as the duck is made for water, the bird made for air, the heart is made for love, the aesthetic nature is made for beauty. When you are converted you find Christ, you find yourself, your Homeland."

Could this be what you are looking for? If so, I think I have said enough about what you have to do to find it. Being reborn is not an end, but a beginning. In November 1942, just after the successful conclusion of the Battle of El Alamein, when Rommel and the Africa Korps had been routed, 30,000 prisoners taken and the first great victory of the war won, Winston

Churchill spoke at the new Lord Mayor's luncheon banquet at Mansion House. "Gentlemen," he said. "This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is perhaps the end of the beginning." Loud cheers greeted his memorable statement. Being born again is the "end of the beginning". There may be many battles to fight ahead. Jesus never said it would be easy. But he assured us that when even one person makes that vital commitment, the angels are cheering (Luke 15:7,10).

Dr. D. James Kennedy, who has been responsible for training thousands of people around the world to share their faith in a meaningful way with others, underlines the importance of this step:

This is the only thing that you must do during your stay on this planet—the only thing you must do. You don't even have to grow up. You don't have to succeed. You don't have to get married. You don't have to have children. You don't have to have a home, a car, and all of the things people think they must have. The only thing that you must have is a rebirth, because your entire future depends upon it.

I offer the final word to C. S. Lewis. When writing of the impossibility of making ourselves acceptable to God by our own efforts, and the need to face the consequences of either accepting the transforming work of Christ in our lives, or of drifting further from God, he said:

It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird; it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We're like eggs at present. And you just can't go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must either be hatched or go bad.

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Steps to becoming a son or daughter of God

If the experiences of many described in this booklet point towards the kind of vital relationship with God that you are looking for, you may find the following steps a helpful guide:

- Tell God you are sorry for your failures in living up to his requirements and giving him his rightful place in your life. Where you feel it necessary, be specific.
- Thank Jesus for paying the price of those failures—for dying for *you*.

- Invite Jesus to come into your life as your personal Saviour and Lord.
- Ask him to give you the strength to live for him, in gratitude for all he plans to give you in this life and the next.
- Trust him to do in your life all he has promised. He said, **“Whoever comes to me I will never drive away”** (John 6:37).

If you take this step of faith, get a modern translation of the New Testament. Start reading it through, asking God to teach you. Learn to talk to him as you would a friend. Find a church where you feel at home and receive encouragement. Ask God to give you opportunities to serve him and to share your faith with others.