

Conversions Of the Great Awakenings

By Ron Smith

The preachers of the Great Awakenings and the Puritans like John Bunyan seemed to have a better understanding of how to preach the Gospel and how to bring souls to deliverance from sin. Some of them like Whitfield, Finney, Nettleton, and others knew how to mix law and Gospel in order to get results. They were also keenly aware of the danger of giving false comforts to those who had been awakened. Some people were so distressed while under conviction that they would almost go mad. When a counselor is faced with such distress in counselees, there is a great temptation to offer counsel that will result in false comfort and a superficial conversion.

This could be the problem with many professing Christians today. That is possibly why some need chronic counseling. They have started out on the pilgrim's progress, but turned back when they came to the slough of despond. Many have even entered full time Christian service, but remain undelivered. Others have been delivered from many things, but still have areas not free.

Let us look at some testimonies of how various people came to conversion during the Great Awakenings of the 17th and 18th centuries. The preachers of those days divided unconverted sinners into three categories: Careless sinners, awakened (or anxious) sinners, and convicted sinners. A careless sinner is one who is not interested in the Gospel. An awakened or anxious sinner is one who senses his need and even many times makes a "decision," is baptized, and even becomes active in church. A convicted sinner gets very anxious, perhaps, because he is convinced of his guilt and condemnation, but is still not converted (not born again).

Asahel Nettleton

Asahel Nettleton was an evangelist in the Second Great Awakening of the early 1800's. He was used to bring about 30,000 hopeful conversions.

His Awakening.

When he first became anxious for his soul, he did not have a right conception of the depravity of his heart. He was awakened to his dangerous condition, and understood that he needed something he did not have, but did not yet see the enormity of his depraved condition. This caused him to go about to establish his own righteousness. Now days many would mistakenly call that conversion. They jump to the conclusion saying “peace, peace when there is no peace.” He got very abundant in his outward service to God. He quit worldly amusements and forsook ungodly companions. He started praying half the night. He was converted from his former bad habits but still did not have a changed heart.

But after doing this for some time, he became discouraged because he did not seem to get an answer to his prayers. Then he began to despair and doubt the existence of God and the authenticity of the Bible (This is a common experience for many awakened sinners. Their sub-conscience mind seeks to justify themselves any way possible.) He then "wished the Bible to be false, because he saw that it condemned him."¹ But then the thought would arise, "What if it is true. Then I am lost forever."

Conviction.

Conviction is the final stage of the “work of humiliation” (also called the preparatory work). Jesus said He would send the Comforter to convince (convict) the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. Until the sinner is totally convinced that he is guilty, God is right, and he is in danger of judgment, he is still not humbled. No one who is convinced of these things by the Holy Spirit can possibly say he is a good person. Until he is thus humbled, he is not a candidate for the revelation of redemption through Christ’s atonement. He will see no need for it until he is convinced.

Under these struggles Nettleton began to see the plague of his own heart. He began to see that the reason his prayers were not answered was because he never had asked and sought in the way God requires. He also saw that all his religious services had been prompted by selfish motives.

¹ All of the quotations about Nettleton are taken from the book, Asahel Nettleton, by Bennet Tyler & Andre Bonar, Banner of Truth Trust, P.O. Box 621, Carlisle, Pa 17013.

He saw that in all the distress which he had experienced on account of his sin, there was no godly sorrow - no true contrition. He had not hated sin because it was committed against God, but had merely dreaded its consequences.¹

He then saw that "such was the wickedness of his heart - that he never would repent unless God should subdue his heart by an act of sovereign grace."²

His Conversion.

Not long after this, there was a change in his feelings. He felt a calmness for which he knew not how to account. He thought, at first, that he had lost his convictions, and was going back to stupidity. This alarmed him; but still he could not recall his former feelings. A sweet peace pervaded his soul. The objects which had given him so much distress, he now contemplated with delight... he began to think it possible that he might have passed from death unto life... Old things had passed away - all things had become new. The character of God now appeared lovely.³

This entire process from awakening to peace took place over a ten-month period.

The Danger of Presumption

It seems that the biggest problem today is presumption. We "presume" we have been converted when we have only been awakened. There must be more of an effort to make our calling and election sure. Even though he had found peace, he was careful, for fear of presumption, to declare that God now accepted him. He said, "I have no doubt that I have religious enjoyment; but the question is, whether it is of the right kind?"⁴

This attitude was common with the preachers of those days. We, in this so - called enlightened day, would not hesitate to say, "I'm saved." Easy believism and instant gratification are rampant today. We now think that faith consists in believing we are saved. True faith consists of believing in God. To understand the nature of saving conversion, we need to go back to the faith of our fathers.

Nettleton said later, as a preacher,

¹ Ibid

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

The first joy of the new born soul does not arise from the belief that his sins are pardoned; for his sins are not pardoned until the love of God is shed abroad in his heart. He can, of course, have no evidence that he is pardoned, until he finds himself rejoicing in the contemplation of the divine character. But the joy of God's salvation may be realized when the individual has no idea that his sins are pardoned. The renewed soul, while contemplating the loveliness of Christ, and other divine objects, forgets himself, and his mind is absorbed in the delightful contemplation of these objects.⁵

In Nettleton's revivals the converts would testify, "I think I love Him because He hates sin - because He hates my sin."⁶ His converts found comfort and joy not from a sense that they were saved from hell, but from new and delightful views of God and the great truths that pertain to His kingdom. "They lost sight of themselves, and their own particular interest, while contemplating the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."⁷ They would say things like, "God is such a glorious being, that methinks I could praise Him even if He should cast me off... The soul forgets all self, even self's own interests - thinking nothing even of its own act of faith - looks directly on the Lord in the face of Jesus - takes its encouragement from God alone, God revealed to sinners in His Son..."⁸ It was when they discovered that they now delighted in God regardless of their condition. The attention was no longer on self. It was now delighting in God.

Nettleton and the New England preachers believed that sinners "never use, but always abuse the means of grace - that in all their efforts to escape future misery and secure future happiness, they are influenced by unholy motives - and that their religious services are mercenary [based on self interest] and sinful."⁹ By mercenary, they meant that the real goal was to be saved from hell or from discomfort or unhappiness. As long as that is the goal, one has not yet had a change of heart. If one says he got saved because he thought the Lord was coming soon, he probably did not get saved. That is a mercenary motive. It is true that such motives may get our quest started, but that would be only the awakening part. We need to proceed in pilgrim's

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

progress to conviction, and then to conversion. Conversion comes when we come to the end of ourselves and are enabled to believe in God. The evidence of that sovereign work of God is when we now delight in God. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation..."

The Christian who sees his own heart in the light of the Gospel, is really and heartily ashamed of his very best performances.¹⁰

He never feels that he deserves God's blessings. He also "loathes" himself for his former deeds that were not good (Ezek 36:31).

Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that *were* not good; and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight, for your iniquities and your abominations (Ezek 36:31 NKJV).

It was entirely absent from the vocabulary of these old time preachers to say, "Souls got saved in that meeting," or "There were many decisions for Christ in that meeting." They would say, "Some souls were awakened, and hopefully converted to Christ." Or they would say, "About thirty appear to be subjects of grace."

Except for Finney, the preachers before 1830 did not believe in invitations. They would have separate meetings to instruct and pray with those who were anxious for their souls. Nettleton objected to Finney's new measures that led to "decisionism" and today's easy-believism.

On one evening, two or three individuals were in such horror of mind, that it became necessary to remove them from the meeting to a neighboring house. This, for a moment, created some confusion, but order was soon restored, when Mr. Nettleton addressed the people in the following manner: "It may, perhaps, be new to some of you, that there should be such distress for sin. But there was great distress on the day of Pentecost, when thousands were pricked in the heart, and cried out: 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?' Some of you may, perhaps, be ready to say: If this is religion, we wish to have nothing to do with it. My friends, this is not religion. Religion does not cause its subjects to feel and act thus. These individuals are thus distressed, not

¹⁰ Ibid

because they have religion, but because they have not religion, and have found this out.¹¹

When these preachers used the word, "religion," they meant what we would call "salvation."

If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion *is* useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world (James 1:26,27 NKJV).

One convert testified, "I then felt the reasonableness of my condemnation so forcibly, that I took up the side of justice, and pleaded the cause of God against myself. In this condition I soon found relief."¹²

On one occasion, Nettleton left a town with many under conviction. He said that he later learned "that the effect of my leaving them as I did - *in the advanced stages of their conviction* - was evidently beneficial. It drove them from all human dependence. Distressing as it is, and cruel as it may seem, it is necessary for them to feel that no arm but God's can help them."¹³

He tells of a woman whose distress continued about three days and nights.

So great was her distress, that she was unable to attend meetings, and was confined to the house. Many called to witness her distress. She had concluded that the day of grace was over; and she was now past the fear of mortals. She continued crying: '*Lord, have mercy on my soul! I am lost! Oh! For ever lost!*' ... It was difficult to keep her in one position. Sometimes sitting, and then kneeling, in a piteous tone she would cry out: '*Young people, take warning from me! Young people, take warning from me!*' The house was constantly visited by curious spectators, often till late at night. Many thought that she could not live long. One physician asked my opinion, whether I thought she would die? From past facts, I have noticed that this *extreme* distress does not generally continue long, especially in seasons of revival; sometimes but a few moments; *commonly* a few hours; and

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

rarely over three days. And when this extreme distress exceeds this time, I begin to fear that it may subside (as it has sometimes done) without a change of heart. On the third day she was rejoicing in hope.

Those who have once been anxious for their souls, and have been laughed out of it, and returned to the thoughtless world, if again awakened, are more distressed than ever.

Those who have labored hard to stifle and throw off their convictions, or those who have formerly resisted the strivings of God's Spirit, are usually the subjects of keen distress, if convinced of sin a second time.

Those who have called revivals by the hardest names, who have expressed the greatest contempt of them, and who have done the most to bring them into disrepute - persons of this description have been the most frightful monuments of distress that I have ever witnessed.

One who formerly thought he had obtained a hope, but lost it, was again awakened, and at the close of the meeting cried aloud. He professes to have found relief, but I think without any good evidence of a change of heart. I fear he has again deceived himself.¹⁴

False Comforts

There is a great temptation for Christians to try to make anxious sinners feel better. Nettleton tried not to fall into that trap. "He had reason to believe many an awakened sinner had his convictions all talked away, and he [was] talked into a false hope."¹⁵

One friend told Nettleton that it seemed as if he could not live another hour under such distress. Nettleton replied, "I can't help you, my dear friend; you must not look to me."¹⁶ We, on the other hand, think we are doing some great service if we talk, talk, and talk. Some of us get a sense of identity from counseling. We feel like we are doing some good. But we are neither doing others nor ourselves any good. We are just being mercenary. Nettleton "often remarked, that a great deal of conversation has a tendency to confuse the mind, and to dissipate, rather than to deepen, religious impressions... If, through false pity, we console the sinner ... there is reason to fear that his blood will be required at our hands." However, Nettleton was "never abrupt; never harsh, but always kind and affectionate."¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

Nettleton's Doctrine of Salvation

Dr. Nettleton's own discovery of salvation (as the reader may remember) was in seeing the glorious character of God. It was not while believing anything about his own interest that his soul felt peace arise, but while believing and contemplating the glory of God in the face of Jesus. It seems to have been his case, as of very many others, that in the act of looking steadfastly at God's glory, as it is specially seen in the cross of Christ, his soul was led by the Spirit into peace almost imperceptibly. ¹⁸

At this point he was delivered from the propensity to sin.
The easy believism of today disposes of the propensity to sin by:

1. They give this propensity a soft name, deny its sinfulness altogether, and do not even call it bad or dangerous.
2. They put into the mouth of the sinner an excuse for retaining his propensity to sin in all its strength.
3. They call upon him to exercise no other *repentance of faith* than that which is consistent with the existence of this infallible tendency or propensity to sin in all its strength.
4. They adopt, for his accommodation, a new theory of regeneration. ¹⁹

Jonathan Edwards said, "The heart can have no tendency to make itself better, until it first has a better tendency." Only God can change the heart.

The progress of conviction is ordinarily as follows: Trouble and alarm,
1. On account of outward sins. 2. On account of sinful thoughts. 3. On account of hardness of heart, deadness and insensibility to divine things, - tendency, bias, proneness, or propensity to sin, both inferred and felt. And this the convicted sinner always regards, not merely as calamitous, but as awfully criminal in the sight of God. And the sinner utterly despairs of salvation without a change in this propensity to sin. And while he feels this propensity to be thus criminal, he is fully aware, that if God, by a sovereign act of His grace, does not interpose to remove or change it, he shall never give his heart to God, nor make

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

one holy choice. If the sinner has not felt this, he has not yet been under conviction of sin, or felt his need of regeneration.²⁰

If we simply get the sinner to come forward and say the sinner's prayer or some other such ritual, all we succeed in doing is making a false convert. Those who adopt that view, make so - called conversions "as easy as you can turn your hand... I know that converts may be made by hundreds and by thousands on these principles, with perfect ease."²¹

When I was a new Christian, I was taught to use that method. The first month after I decided to be a "soul winner," I led thirty people "to the Lord" in thirty days. But then I noticed that not one of them showed any evidence of a changed life. It was real easy to get them to pray the sinner's prayer. It was also "mercenary" on my part. My pastor got me on the platform and bragged on me for being a "soul winner." My head got real big until I saw it was a farce. I then began to preach repentance, and avoided strong-arm tactics. Let God do the work!

I have seen several souls hopefully converted in my ministry as a missionary. But it seems that the ones who really got converted, I did not even lead in the sinner's prayer. I am not saying that there is not a time for that, but the Spirit must lead us, not by rituals and sales pitches. Strong-arm tactics may make us feel good, but do they get people converted? I think not. Let us preach and believe like our Puritan fathers preached and believed. Let us not be so presumptuous so as to think that we moderns are so much more intelligent than our fathers. The Puritans specialized in the nature of saving conversion. We moderns need to read Puritan Solomon Stoddard's book, "The Nature of Saving Conversion."

The Use of the Law

One time someone complained to Dr. Nettleton that preachers dwelt too much on the demands of the law.

"Believers," said he, "are not under the law, but under grace." "Is it not the duty of believers," said Dr. Nettleton, "to repent?" - "Certainly," he replied. "Of what is it their duty to repent?" said Dr. Nettleton. The man saw at once the precipice before him. If he said, "Of sin," he perceived that the next question would be: What is sin but a

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

transgression of the law? And if believers are not under obligations to obey the law, what can there be for them to repent of?²²

What is called "saved" now days, is many times (if not most of the time) only awakened. Truly delivered people remain in the faith. Those who are only awakened will fall away if they are given a false comfort. "Once delivered, always delivered." It is also possible that many of our church members and preachers are merely awakened, or merely convicted, and have outward religion only with no true converted heart.

Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble. (2 Peter 1:10)

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²² Ibid