

Sermon for Sunday, February 4, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
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"CONVINCED OR CONVERTED?"

St. John 3:1-21

Text: "Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born anew.'" St. John 3:5,6 and 7

The dictionary will tell you that the word "convince" means to make a person feel sure; to cause to believe; to persuade by argument or proof. On the other hand, that same dictionary will tell you that the word "convert" means to change, to turn, to transform. When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, he was a convinced man. He said to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know (that is, we are convinced) that you are a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that you do except God be with him." Interestingly enough, Jesus immediately puts his finger on the problem. In effect he says, "Well, Nicodemus, I know you are convinced about me, but that isn't enough. The fact is, you need to be converted. You have got to be born anew."

I suspect that if the truth were known about most of us this morning we would discover that we have had a conviction experience rather than a conversion experience. There came that time, either suddenly or a slowly dawning realization, that the claims made about Jesus Christ were true. There came that time when--while we may still question some of the particulars and some of the details--we accepted as true, as fact, the basic claim that Jesus was somehow the Son of God, that he died for our sins, and that salvation is inevitably tied to him. Yet, as Jesus made undisputably clear to Nicodemus, there is a difference between being convinced about him and converted to him.

One of the running arguments that the church has carried on for centuries has been whether a person must have a sudden and dramatic conversion experience that is so vivid, clear, and memorable that the person knows the date, the time and the place when it happened to him, or, whether it is a growing experience, a slow, steady sort of thing that one day one looks back and realizes that he is a Christian but he cannot quite put his finger on the how or the when or the where of it. Over the years as a minister, I have had a growing feeling that there is really no such thing as a gradual conversion. I have had a growing feeling that while a person may progressively and slowly be convinced of the truth about Jesus, that it is impossible for him to make a truly and genuinely conversion to Jesus Christ without being aware of the struggle going on in his life. The reason is that to be converted to Jesus Christ means that I must surrender my will to him. By an act of my will I invite him to take over the Lordship of my life. That is a decisive action on my part and I don't believe I can make a decision like that gradually.

As I read my New Testament, I do not discover a single conversion experience that is gradual and unawares. For the converted there is an encounter, a wrestling, a moment of surrender when a person by a conscious, deliberate act of his will surrenders his life to Jesus Christ. Now this may occur over a period of time and in that sense be gradual, yet I find it difficult to believe that such an act of the will can occur to a person and him not be aware of it. There are those who have been raised in the church and in Christian homes so much so that it seems the natural and inevitable thing for them at the appropriate time to join the church. I have said for myself that I hope my own children always know Jesus as Lord; that they believe in him. I wanted my children to be raised in a home where they would always believe in Christ. But I am changing my mind. What we are really talking about, I think, is not conversion but conviction. We are talking about

believing something and not about being transformed or changed by something. Today is my youngest daughter's 13th birthday. She is in communicants class this morning. A year ago on the eve of her twelfth birthday, Elizabeth and I were in bed and it was late. We heard a tap on our door and it was Carol. She came in and sat on the edge of the bed. I said, "Carol, what are you doing up this late at night?" And she said, "Well, you know tomorrow I am going to be twelve." We said, "Yes, we are aware of that." She said, "Do you know what I would like most for my birthday?" We had already bought the things. We said with some trepidation, "What would you like for your twelfth birthday?" She said, "I would like you and Mother to pray with me that God would fill me with his Holy Spirit." That is what she wanted--a decisive surrender of her will to Jesus. Now, I was raised in a Christian home. I think I can honestly say that there never was a time when I did not believe in God; there never was a time that I did not believe that Jesus was God's Son; there never was a time that I did not believe that Jesus died for my sins. I was always convinced of these things. But can we equate conviction with conversion? The dictionary defines conviction as meaning to make a person feel sure about something; to cause to believe; or to persuade by argument or proof. Now it is a good thing to be convinced about Jesus Christ but is this not a far different thing from being converted to Christ when by a decisive act of your will you invite him to assume Lordship of your life? You see, the dictionary defines converted as meaning to change, to turn, to transform or in the words of Jesus "to be born anew."

One of the serious problems in the church today is the fact that we are losing our young people. By the time our young people get to high school they are becoming Sunday school drop outs and by the time they get to college, we have lost most of them. Now, if you talk to these young people you will find that they are deeply concerned about spiritual matters. You will discover that as far as beliefs go, they have some pretty firm convictions. Those convictions may not be quite the same that mother and daddy had--and maybe that's a good thing!--but young people are for the most part deeply convinced about spiritual things. As a matter of fact, I think the current interest in the so-called hippie movement or the counter culture, the so-called drug cult, the meditation movement that has attracted so many of our movie stars and popular musicians and I think other such spiritually oriented movements are happening precisely because the young people of today have some deep spiritual concerns and some deep spiritual needs and some deep spiritual convictions. But why has the church failed to meet these deep needs? Could it be that our youth have been convinced of Christianity but not converted to Christ?

Our communicants' class is meeting upstairs this morning. That is where Mr. Megahan is. He is teaching it. Across the years those of us who work with young people who go through the communicants' class discover that within a few years, these young people confess that this communicant class experience did not mean much to them although at that time they did come on into the membership of the church. Why is this? Why is it that these young people are lost to the church as they grow older just as quickly as young people who never went through a communicant's class? Could it be that we are convincing them but we are not converting them by transformation of their hearts to Jesus Christ?

Now long ago a young lady came to my study to talk over a problem. A young man had asked her to be his wife. She described the young man for me. He was handsome, intelligent, from a fine family, popular in school, well mannered, and above all loved her very much. I said to her, "It seems to me you have found the ideal person. What is your problem?" "Well," she said, "mother and daddy think he is ideal, too. All my girl friends envy me. I feel he would make a wonderful husband. But," she said, "there is one problem. I don't love him." Now, she was certainly convinced about that young man. He had all of the qualities that she would want

in a husband. But she wasn't converted. Her heart was not surrendered to him. And isn't this so often our problem with Jesus? As we see him and what he stands for and what he does for us spread on the pages of the New Testament, we are surely convinced about him. Like Nicodemus we can say with conviction, "Yes, we know that you are a man sent from God for nobody could do what you do except God be with him." But it is one thing to be convinced about Jesus and it is another thing to be in love with Jesus. It is one thing to be convinced about Jesus and another thing to have our hearts strangely warmed, to be changed and transformed by our love for him.

How real is Jesus to us this morning? For most of us he is certainly real as an idea or a conviction. We will argue with any atheist about Jesus and try to convince him by argument or proof that the New Testament is right and that Jesus is who we say he is. But how many of us know him as a person. For how many of us is he a living reality in our hearts--so much so that we can truly speak of knowing him as our personal Saviour. Now, I am quite aware that what I am saying may be creating some hostility in some of you. You may be saying something like this to yourself, "Now, who does he think he is, telling me I am not saved because I haven't had some kind of emotional experience. I'm just as saved as he is." Now that may be very true. I don't intend to offend anyone although sometimes the Gospel is offensive to us and neither am I saying you have to have an emotional experience. You may or may not have an emotional experience. But I want to raise a question that we need to keep asking ourselves. It does seem to me that the great problem with the church today is not really a need for a new theology or a new morality or greater social involvement or new organization. What we really need is to move from being convinced people to converted people whose lives have been transformed by a commitment of the will and a surrendering of the life to Jesus Christ.

Look, for example, at a great man like John Wesley. John Wesley had come to America early as a minister who was coming over here to be a missionary. It was after that that he went home and went to a worship service at Aldersgate and got his heart strangely warmed. A lot of people have called this experience a sort of "second blessing." As a matter of fact, it was this "second blessing" idea that led to the formation of the Church of the Nazarene or the Nazarene Church. The Nazarenes were originally Methodists. But they were people who believed that they needed something above and beyond what had happened to them. I have often thought that maybe they were just convinced Christians but they got to studying and reading the Bible and they knew there had to be more than they were experiencing and so they began to be converted Christians and when that happened, their lives got changed and so they called that a "second blessing." They called it complete sanctification. Some of their fellow Methodists did not like being told that they had to have a "second blessing" or to have an experience called complete sanctification so they just sort of moved these people right on out of the church and that was alright with them so they just started a new denomination, the Church of the Nazarene. That church is just like the Methodist Church basically except it emphasizes the "second blessing".

Now, about the turn of the century an entirely new group came into being and they are called the Pentecostals. And the Pentecostals talk about a sort of second experience that they call the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Again, people didn't like to be told that what they had of God was inadequate or that they needed something additional and they kept saying to the Pentecostals, "You are trying to tell me you have something I don't have or that I have got to have what you have got." So they kicked the Pentecostals out of the main line denominations. Yet, these people had something obviously very real and very powerful happening in their lives and they are the fastest growing denomination in the world today. Just as an illustration, we Presbyterians have been down in Brazil for over a hundred years,

In that hundred years we have invested millions of dollars and we have invested hundreds of missionaries lives and as a consequence of that investment at the end of a hundred years, we had only a little over one hundred thousand Brazilian Presbyterians--converts to Jesus Christ. The Pentecostals have been down there about fifty years and they have over three million. That is a pretty obvious difference.

The point I am making is this: Are the Nazarene and the Pentecostals wrong to talk about a second blessing or a baptism of the Holy Spirit for people who are already Christians? Could it be that what they are really talking about is something happening in the lives of people so that they move from being convinced Christians to becoming converted Christians? Let me take one biblical example that the Pentecostals use to prove that in addition to being saved you need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The incident occurs in the 8th chapter of Acts. There Phillip goes to the city of Samaria and he begins to preach to the people of Samaria. We are told that as he preached the people believed about Jesus and they were baptized men and women. Then we read down in the 14th verse that Peter and John came down from Jerusalem and they laid their hands on the people and they prayed for them and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. As the Bible puts it, "because as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit." Here, say the Pentecostals, is a clear cut incident where salvation and the baptism of the Holy Spirit are seen as two separate and distinct events. Here, they say, is clear evidence that receiving the Holy Spirit is a distinct experience. But could we not put another interpretation on this? Could we not also say that as Phillip preached to the Samaritans they were convinced about Jesus and gave their minds to him. But when Peter and John came and prayed with them they were converted to Jesus and gave their hearts to him. You know, I think that is what religion is all about. It is taking your convictions and transplanting them eighteen inches, lowering your convictions from your intellect to your heart so that you are a transformed person--born anew.

Could it be possible this morning that you and I have given our minds to Jesus because we are convinced about him? And because we are it changes our lives. It makes a difference. You are here this morning because we are convinced about Jesus. We give our money to the church because we are convinced about Jesus. We live by certain spiritual laws because we are convinced about Jesus. But the real question is: Are we also converted to Jesus? Have we given him our whole heart? Have we surrendered our lives totally and completely? Have we been transformed into new creatures in Jesus? Have we been dramatically and wonderfully changed?

Jesus made it quite clear to Nicodemus that being convinced about his was insufficient. He made it perfectly plain that being convinced was inadequate. He said to him, "Do not be surprised because I tell you, 'you must be born anew.'" That is radical talk, isn't it? This is dramatic language. Can you imagine a person having his life so radically and dramatically transformed and not being aware that it happened? And do you know, the thought occurs to me that there never would have been a Nazarene church or a Pentecostal church if we had not confused being a convinced Christian with being a converted Christian. I'm guilty myself! I have had fine, active, understanding church members come to me and say something like this "I've never had any dramatic experience. There is nothing in my Christian experience that stands out. But I have always believed in Jesus and tried to live a good life. Am I not a Christian?" How is a preacher going to answer that question? I have always said, "Why, of course you are a Christian." But I have never felt to make any judgment at all one way or the other. The only right I have is to say "I don't know. Only you can answer that question. But let's ask the right question--have you been born again? Are you convinced or converted?"

I want to ask each of you that same question this morning. Have you been truly born anew? Have you been radically transformed, dramatically changed, wonderfully turned around? Are you a convinced Christian or a converted Christian? Are you born anew? Only you can answer that question.