

# The OBJECT And FRUIT of FAITH

By

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Apostolic evangelism and preaching was centered in and radiated from the cross, where modern evangelism generally is centered in the human experience. Popular evangelists and religious authors emphasize change taking place in the believer's life when he reaches bottom, prays to Jesus and undergoes a conversion.

William James, In "Psychology of Religious Experience," describes many kinds of reformation due to religious experience apart from faith in the gospel of Christ. Alcoholics Anonymous has been able to effect great changes in the lives of people without them ever embracing the Christian faith. Traumatic experiences often trigger dramatic reformation even to the point of religious fervor. But is this Christian evangelism?

Jesus began His ministry by preaching repentance. But repentance is not salvation. The basis of justification — the forgiveness of sin and adoption into God's eternal family — is not the change from bad to good, but the death of Christ on the cross. The reformation of life is the result of salvation, not the cause of it. Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:19). Faith must be centered in that gospel, that "one died for all." It grows out of the conviction that for our sin we deserve the death penalty, but that God, in mercy, imputed that sin to Christ, "made Him to be sin on our behalf," and sent Him to die that death for us. Such conviction drives one to change. But salvation is never because he has changed from big sins to little sins, or from many sins to few (for even after conversion one is still subject to the pressures of the flesh and cannot say that he is without sin (I John 1:8–10). For forgiveness, after conversion as well as before, the believe depends upon the cleansing power of Christ's death, and not upon his change of life-style.

The Gospel binds up all of time, including the final judgment and execution of the law of death for sin, into one event: the judgmental death of Jesus as a substitute dier for all who belong to Him. That event is historical. It took place on a certain day at a certain hour, and is recorded for all history. It is geographical. It took place outside the walls of Jerusalem on the hill of Golgotha. It is final. It never will take place again. It was done "once for all" and by one offering (Christ) has perfected forever them that are sanctified" (Heb. 10:10–14). The death penalty was met at that point in time and place by Jesus, and all who enter into that death by faith through baptism are justified and reckoned righteous in God's sight (Rom. 6:3–7). This justification will stand in the day when Jesus returns to judge the world in righteousness.

Jesus did not die to show us how sinful we are nor to demonstrate God's love, although the cross does both. He died to justify us in God's sight that we might not have to die the death ourselves. Therefore the power of salvation is in the cross, and what God through Christ did there.

But it is not the cross that is held up in today's evangelism. Rather it is man's own attitude and inner-experience, usually expressed as "decision" and "being born again." While both, decision and the new birth, are elements of conversion of Christ, they are

only part of the response and not the basic element of it. Furthermore, they do not produce salvation but are produced by it.

It is a common thing for people to be urged to make a decision for Christ before they have any knowledge of what His death and resurrection are all about. They undergo a bit of reform and think they have been born again. Decision and reform become the foundation of salvation. Salvation is attributed to the fact that “I decided to turn my life over to Jesus” or “I made the decision to invite Jesus into my heart.” The focus is not on the death of Jesus and the depth of God’s mercy in redemption, but on the depth of the experience of the believer. The emphasis is designed to generate a special subjective feeling in one’s heart and mind until he is convinced that a sufficient experience has transpired. It boils down to a decision to live a better life and apply principles of Christian teaching to one’s life. Testimonies often could be summed up: “Look how bad I was, and how good I am now.”

Such decision-conversion eliminates the cross. If one can so change his life and make it acceptable to God, then the death of Jesus to redeem man and cleanse him from sin was unnecessary.

It makes man the author of his own salvation. This is the message that comes across in so many testimonies that give blow-by-blow detail of the process that led to the “decision” to “let Jesus run my life.” It says, “I had a hard struggle, but I finally won. Now I am living the life that puts me on God’s side and means salvation.” This is a far cry from the testimony of Paul who spoke of himself as still a wretched man, chief of sinners, who failed miserably to walk perfectly, but who had obtained mercy because Christ “came into the world to save sinners” (Rom. 7:10–19, 24, I Tim. 1:15–16).

It reduces assurance of salvation. One can never know that his experience is as deep and complete as it could be. How many anxious people are desperately trying to find a religious experience that tops the last one, so that they may be reassured of total change and total acceptance to God? They make the “decision” prescribed by the evangelist, then begin a never-ending search for the key to the total religious experience. They shop churches for one that will sweep them up to a new high, and read the books and watch the religious shows for some new angle that will serve as a booster shot to a greater experience. Vast numbers of people finally give up, having found that they cannot live up to their decision, and that what they thought was new birth was only a new effort at the old task of becoming righteous by one’s own works. They have trusted in reformation and not in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It is significant that Jesus said, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved,” not “He that makes a decision for me shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). The apostles confronted sinners, not with the challenge to “invite Jesus in,” but with the challenge to believe and repent. Repentance is not the same as decision making. Repentance is produced by godly sorrow for sin (II Cor. 7:10) in the light of God’s revelation. You do not decide to be sorry. It is the product of the seed of the gospel falling on fertile ground. One may sit down and weigh the claims of the gospel — the meaning and impact of the death of Jesus, the sin and judgment involved in the cross and the implication of one’s own destiny in it all — but the result will not be a calculated decision. It will be a matter of faith or disbelief. Belief will bring forth the fruit of obedience, so one is saved by faith, and not decision.

According to Jesus, the seed is the word. Peter teaches that one is “begotten again...through the word of God” (I Pet. 1:23). The seed is self-growing. When it falls on fertile soil, growth begins and the begetting has taken place. This is the work of the holy Spirit, whose business it is to “convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). No one makes a decision to be convicted of sin! Such conviction is the result of faith produced by the word of the gospel, and when it is complete it brings repentance and the compelling desire to be united with Jesus in His death that sin might be forgiven (Rom. 6:1–4).

The process of being begotten by the word, then baptized into Christ’s death is the same thing as being born of the water and the spirit, or “born again.” The whole process is centered in what Jesus did in dying to meet sin’s penalty, not in what man does by way of self-reformation or personal inner-experience. The saving of a man is dependent on the experience of Jesus on man’s behalf and man’s faith in what He did, not upon man’s experience nor emotions generated by his experiences. The realization (faith) that one’s sin is forgiven through Christ’s death is a rich and thrilling experience of joy; still, this experience is not the sign of salvation. It is God’s word that gives assurance of salvation, not one’s feelings.

What Jesus said, “You must be born again,” He was not saying that you must seek for some “deeper experience” as a Christian. We hear of those who are said to be “born again” because they have decided to live differently, or experienced a dramatic even in life. Some are described as “born again Christians”, indicating that others may be Christians without being born again. Elaborate descriptions of the experience make it seem as though one is saying to another, “I am more born again than you!”

When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus on being born from above (John 3:3–5) He did not speak of reform nor of an experience a person could initiate, but rather of the Holy Spirit and the witness He would bear (Verses 8–11) concerning the fulfillment of the mission of Jesus to die for sin (Verses 14–16). Being born again (or from above, as the Greek also translates) begins with a conception, a begetting by the word, the work of the Holy Spirit. The faith thus produced brings forth the fruit of obedience in repentance and baptism, and the birth is completed. The believer is neither saved by his decision nor by his new birth, but by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. The change in life may be sudden and radical or slow and gradual. Salvation does not depend on this experience of change, but on faith in what Jesus did for him. He looks not to his own experiences for assurance of salvation but to the promise of the gospel. Since Jesus fully died for the believer’s sin, then all his sin is fully accounted for to God through Christ. It isn’t a question of how well he reforms or how he feels or what he experiences, but whether or not he believes Christ actually died for sin.

One thing more. When one is converted, the old man is to be “reckoned” dead, just as dead as Christ was for three days. The old life of self-centeredness. Seeking our own, is no longer our. Instead, life is centered in Christ’s purpose and power, not because we have arbitrarily chosen to make it so, but because the seed of the word has grown to the point that it produces that kind of fruit. Sometimes the fruit is evident right away, but some trees take a great many years of growth before a full crop of fruit comes forth.

The apostles didn’t talk about decisions, experiences and being born again. Instead, they preached Jesus, that He came from Heaven, died for sin, arose from the

grave, ascended to Heaven and rules as Lord of the universe. Assurance of salvation comes from faith in the sufficiency of Christ, not in one's own sufficiency nor depth of his experience. To grow in faith is to focus less on self and our own experience and more in Christ and His work, until we don't even think about self at all

At that point, to live is Christ. (Phil. 1:21).

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