

Introduction

It was said of Robert Murray M'Cheyne that when he preached you felt 'as if he was dyin' a'most to have ye converted'; that is, he wanted your conversion, there and then. That is what you felt. And you were right. M'Cheyne wasn't play-acting, putting on a show: your conversion *was* his consuming passion. He wanted you to be convicted of your sin, repent, and turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting him to wash you in his blood and clothe you in his righteousness, and so have peace with God. To crown it all, M'Cheyne wanted this so badly you felt he would almost have died to get it.

'A bit OTT, isn't it?'

Not at all! Listen to Paul, in words which surely defy our ability to understand or explain:

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh (Rom. 9:1-3).

Don't you think that it was Paul's example that gave M'Cheyne the stimulus for his eloquence?

We can take it further. What did the apostle so earnestly desire? What was it that drove him to such lengths? 'Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved' (Rom. 10:1). Saved! Converted! That's what he wanted: Jews to be saved. And not just his fellow-Jews. As he told the Colossians: 'Christ... we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this end I also labour, striving according to his working which works in me mightily' (Col. 1:27-28). This is what Paul was after. Sinners to be saved! Sinners to be converted! This is what he sought so earnestly.

Introduction

Now, wherever did Paul, in his turn, learn this vehemence and desire? Where did he get it? From whom did he learn it? He got it from God himself!

He met it, first of all, when Christ confronted him on the road to Damascus, and converted him, the Lord immediately spelling out his life's work from that time on, both as a believer and an apostle (Acts 26:15-18). I shall return to this. For now, I simply ask: at which school did Paul enrol in order to learn how to carry out this great commission from the Lord Christ?

Well, we know that he did not go to any man's seminary (Gal. 1:16-24). No! He went to the school of Scripture; that is where he learned to preach. It was there, when he was alone in Arabia, that God, by his Spirit, showed him how to preach. Not only that, the Lord gave him the grace to do it. And God used Scripture (the Old Testament) to teach the apostle.

Paul, of course, by his deep and long-standing acquaintance with the Old Testament, had known the book of Isaiah like the back of his hand. But now that he was regenerate, for the first time he was able to read the prophet's words with a true understanding. The veil had been lifted (2 Cor. 3:15-16); God had shined into his heart (2 Cor. 4:6). With open eyes, and an enlightened mind, Paul could now grasp what the prophet was talking about. He saw how God, picturing himself as a man, went about addressing sinners. And meditating upon that revelation, Paul was taught by the Spirit to go and do likewise.

What exactly did Paul discover, and where did he discover it in Isaiah? Listen to God himself speaking, first through the prophet, and then as quoted by Paul. Let the Almighty's words sink in. This is God speaking to men; God, I say, speaking to men, pleading with men as sinners: 'I have stretched out my hands all day long to a rebellious people' (Isa. 65:2), he declared. Staggering, isn't it? But so said God. Here we have the Almighty pleading with men, pleading with rebellious sinners! Paul, moved by this tremendous thought, quoted the words in question when writing to the Romans: 'All day long I have stretched out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people' (Rom. 10:21). Note the sort of sinners God pleads with: the rebellious, the disobedient, the contrary. Incredible!

Introduction

Clearly, this amazing revelation, newly-understood by the apostle, was etched deep in his mind and heart. So much so, he could never forget it. He was never the same again. From that moment on, he was a driven man, obsessed with this principle: ‘Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!’ (1 Cor. 9:16). It was this that compelled him throughout the rest of his life, as he never tired of letting people know:

I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Rom. 1:14-16).

Christ... [sent] me to preach the gospel... not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified... And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 1:17 – 2:2).

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law towards God, but under law towards Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel’s sake (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

If ever a man lived out his dictum, ‘I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ’, Paul was that man.

It was no flash in the pan. As he was bidding his final farewell at Miletus, and knowing that imprisonment and worse awaited him, even then the apostle was still determined to go on pleading with sinners for their conversion. In his time, ‘Jesus [had] resolutely set out [set his face, NKJV] for Jerusalem’ (Luke 9:51,

Introduction

NIV). Paul now did the same, as he made clear to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:22-24).

Not only that. Throughout his ministry, Paul preached the gospel in the same way as God himself did; he was a ‘man of God’ indeed. Addressing Agrippa, for instance, the apostle’s words were all the more poignant by reason of the chains hanging from his wrists as he stretched out his arms to the man, looking for his conversion (Acts 26:1,29). Like his God, he stretched out his hands to the unconverted. And, like his God, he was moved in his heart towards sinners.

And that’s not all. Paul could call upon his own experience of Christ, could he not? Had not the Lord Jesus met him on the Damascus road? Had not the risen and exalted Lord shown him his power, along with his mercy, grace and love? Paul certainly saw it that way (Gal. 1:11-16; 1Tim. 1:11-16). He never forgot how the Son of God had dealt with him in that encounter. So much so, when he in his turn confronted sinners with the gospel, he did it with all his being, preaching Christ to them – stressing Christ’s power to save, and offering sinners the same mercy, grace and love of Christ that he himself had found.

Moreover, he had the moving example of the Lord Jesus who, when he was on earth, had been a preacher. In writing his Gospel, Mark, introducing Christ to us, recorded that ‘Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel”’ (Mark 1:14-15).

And how did the Son of God preach? Paul discovered it in the book of Proverbs – wisdom personified standing in the public square, calling out to men (Prov. 1:20-33; 8:1-36; 9:1-6). Now regenerate, the apostle could see that this portrays none other than Christ in the new covenant (1 Cor. 1:24,30). Wisdom (Christ), calling to men, freely offers them all his benefits, pleading with them to receive them. They refuse! Wisdom responds, spelling out the dreadful consequences of their refusal: ‘But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand...’ (Prov. 1:24, NIV). Do not miss the vital point. Note how Christ pleads with men, stretching out his hand, and this, of course,

Introduction

not to smite, but to save – as he showed beyond any vestige of doubt when he was here among men.¹

Coming to his preaching at that time, listen to the Lord Jesus in full flow; feel the passion in his words:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! (Matt. 23:37).

And we know why the Saviour pleaded with sinners in this way:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. He who believes in him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:14-18).

Note it well: ‘God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved’. The final judgement is certain, yes, but mercy was God’s great purpose in sending his Son into the world. And when Christ preached, he made this crystal clear. We know what Christ wanted his hearers to do. We know what he offered them. We know what he commanded, invited and exhorted them to do, what he pleaded with them to do:

Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle

¹ Proverbs sets out the principles of gospel preaching very clearly. The preacher is Christ himself (1:20-33; 8:1-36; 9:1-6), using his ministers (all his people) (9:1-6); the offer is to all (1:20-22; 8:1-5; 9:3-6); the benefits offered in the gospel are spelled out (1:24,33; 8:5-35; 9:2,5); but the warnings against refusal are made equally clear (1:22-32; 8:36); and all is with passion, uplifted voice, and stretched out hand (*passim*). In addition to the references in the main text above, see Isa. 55:1-13; Matt. 22:1-14; 23:38-39; Luke 13:34-35; 14:15-24; 2 Cor. 5:11 – 6:2.

Introduction

and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30).

This is the school where Paul learned what he had to preach, what he had to preach for, and how to do it. These were his teachers. This is the kind of curriculum he mastered – or, rather, which mastered him. This is what made him the man that he was. This is what made him the compulsive preacher he was. This is what made him burn with love for lost sinners, and stimulated him into making him passionate in his appeals to them.²

Shouldn't every believer want to attend the same school and be taught the same lesson by the same master? Shouldn't we all want to be fired by the same love, the same passion?

In light of the many testimonies in the Scriptures – Psalm 2:10-12; Proverbs 1:20-33; 8:1-11; Isaiah 45:22; 55:1-3,6-9; 65:2; Ezekiel 33:11; Matthew 22:1-10; Luke 14:16-24; John 6:29; Acts 17:30; Romans 2:4; 2 Corinthians 5:18 – 6:2; 1 Timothy 2:3-4; 2 Peter 3:9; and so on – we can be left with no doubt whatsoever: God himself desires the conversion of sinners, and works in his ministers to call them to Christ to be saved. As Paul could so movingly assert: 'Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God' (2 Cor. 5:20).

All this applies to all believers today. All believers are ministers of the new covenant. There are no exceptions! I will not stop to establish the point here – see my *The Priesthood of All Believers* for that – but, I say it again, all believers are new-covenant ministers, and all preach. But, of course, I am now using 'preach' in its fullest and widest New Testament sense. Not all believers can engage in what we might call 'pulpit work'. Obviously not. Nevertheless, each and every believer *is* a minister of the new covenant, and every believer *is* a preacher of 'the glorious gospel of the blessed God' (1 Tim. 1:11), one who has the privilege and the duty 'to testify to the gospel of the grace of God' (Acts 20:24).

² I do not, of course, use 'appeal' in the revivalist sense.

Introduction

Well then, how should we believers go about it? Whenever we get the opportunity to speak to sinners – whether in public or in private, in a pulpit or not – all of us who are believers ought to be moved by the same desire as the apostle, the same desire as the incarnate Christ when he was preaching, the same desire as God himself displays today. Do you ask what that desire is? Nothing less than the salvation of sinners, the salvation of all who hear us!

Every believer, therefore, should be ‘a driven man’. Knowing the terror of the Lord, and being compelled by the love of Christ, we, too, should long for sinners to come to Christ. We, too, should seek to persuade them to repent and believe (Luke 14:23; Acts 18:4; 20:21; 26:28-29; 2 Cor. 5:11,14). In short, we, too, should want them to be converted. And we should make no bones about it. *All who know us should realise that this is what we want for them.*

In short, may all who know us be able to point the finger at us and say, as they said of Robert Murray M‘Cheyne: ‘This man, this woman, “preached [to me] as if he [or she] was dyin’ a’most to have me converted”’. I rebuke myself in saying it, of course, but I let it stand. It is nothing less than the truth.³

At any rate, reader, this is what lies behind all that I set out in this volume. This is what I intend to develop in the pages which follow. I am concerned here with the conversion of sinners. Nothing could be more important. I am convinced that each one of us is born a sinner, each one of us is by nature under the wrath of God, and, each one of us, unless we are converted, will perish eternally (John 3:18,36; 5:24-29; Acts 17:30-31; Eph. 2:1-3; Heb. 9:27; 12:25; and so on). We must be converted!

But the doctrine of conversion is being threatened in these dark days. I realise, of course, that Satan is always attacking on this front. He knows that if he can stop men preaching for the conversion of sinners, he will be taking a big step towards keeping them on the high road to perdition. Yes, that is true. Satan is always trying to undermine conversion; he is never off duty! Nevertheless, he is certainly very active at the moment, and the

³ See both my *The Gospel Offer is Free* and my *Septimus Sears* for much more on this.

Introduction

biblical doctrine of conversion is under heavy and sustained attack in our day. And I am deeply concerned about it.

So serious are the consequences of these attacks – consequences which are eternally dire for sinners – I must do what I can about it. With that conviction pressing on my heart and mind, I have taken up my pen to produce this book. This is what motivates me. My book represents the latest effort to do what I can to maintain, promote and encourage the biblical doctrine of conversion. More, I want to encourage all believers who read my words – I including myself – to be more earnest than we often are in our addresses to sinners.

Indeed, let me take a dose of my own medicine, and take it here and now. If any unconverted person is scanning these pages, my desire is that you, through reading what I say here, might be brought to Christ. Reader, I have to tell you, unless you repent and trust Christ, you will eternally perish (Luke 13:3-5). But, I am delighted to assure you, Christ stands both willing and able to save you – even at this very moment. Call upon the name of the Lord, therefore, and you will be saved (Rom. 10:13). I urge you to do it. I urge you to do it now!

Ultimately, of course, as in all else, it is the glory of God that is at stake; that is what is under attack in the threat to conversion. And it is the glory of God which counts (Matt. 5:16; 6:13; 9:8; John 5:23; 9:3; 11:4; 13:31-32; 14:13; 1 Cor. 10:31; 1 Pet. 2:12; 4:11,16; and so on). ‘The glory of God’ is one of the great phrases in all Scripture – try putting it into a concordance search-engine, and see! Why, God has been pleased to describe himself as the Glory of Israel (Hos. 4:7, NIV)!

The glory of God! Above all, it was for his glory that God sent his Son into the world. It was for the glory of God his Father that Jesus came and died. And it is for the glory of God that the Holy Spirit convicts and converts sinners today. It is in this way, supremely, that the triune God is glorified. The Lord Christ, in his high-priestly prayer, expressed it thus:

Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son also may glorify you, as you have given him authority over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ

Introduction

whom you have sent. I have glorified you on the earth. I have finished the work which you have given me to do. And now, O Father, glorify me together with yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was (John 17:1-5).

And hear the apostle:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:1-6).

Reader, in light of this biblical emphasis on the glory of God, there is only one ultimate motive that I can have in casting this volume out into the world. The everlasting good of sinners is, of course, a powerful motive in its own right. And righteous indignation at the assault upon any doctrine of God is surely a worthy emotion. But it is, above all, the glory of God which matters. And the glory of God is what I most desire in producing the book now in your hand.

Slim the volume is, I grant you, but, even so, may it prove to be a blessing far beyond its size. May it indeed 'punch above its weight'! May many have cause to thank God that it was ever published!