

# Thomas Hooker & the Doctrine of Conversion

by Ian Murray

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*The sermon explores the doctrine of conversion in Puritan preaching, focusing on the life and ministry of Thomas Hooker and the Puritan view of conversion as a process that involves a real activity on the part of sinners.*

**Duration:** 1:02:33

**Scripture:** Luke 15:17, John 5:44, Romans 10:17

**Topics:** "Conversion Experience", "Salvation Assurance"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the variety of ways in which God deals with sinners. He emphasizes that conversion and assurance of salvation do not always happen instantaneously, using the example of John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress. The preacher also mentions how God can speak to individuals through sermons, even when they are not seeking spiritual guidance. He concludes by highlighting that there is no set pattern for how God works in the lives of individuals, comparing it to opening a locked door in different ways.

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## Transcript

Mr. Patterson and Christian friends, it's a great joy to be with you this afternoon at the beginning of this Winter Institute here in Jackson. We have greatly looked forward to it and now the moment has actually arrived to which we have looked. I'm afraid you'll have to wait until later in the day to hear a real Scottish accent.

I may be a true Scot, but I speak English, but you will hear Welsh, and you will hear Scot, and I hope you will hear English. Now the organisers of the Institute left me open as to my subject and I therefore, with three lectures to give to you and one sermon, I chose to prepare lectures on the following subjects. This afternoon I want to speak on Thomas Hooker and the doctrine of conversion in Puritan preaching.

And then in the first session tomorrow morning, I want to speak on the first theological controversy that ever took place as far as it is known here in the North American continent, and that is the controversy over assurance in Massachusetts in 1636. And then on a somewhat lighter note tomorrow afternoon, an address on pioneer Puritan evangelism in the Southern Pacific in the middle of the last century. The outworking of reformed theology in the mission field of the New Hebrides in the middle of the 19th century.

And then God willing on Wednesday morning, I shall speak from a text of scripture. This afternoon then, Thomas Hooker and the doctrine of conversion in Puritan preaching. Now I suppose that the best known Puritan book must be John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress.

And I'm sure you have often heard it said that Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress is one of the most uncontroversial books. Well it is true that Bunyan had a fine Catholic spirit, but I'm not sure that it is true that his Pilgrim's Progress is an uncontroversial book. Because at the very beginning of that great classic, Bunyan has at least two things to say which are out of line with a good deal of modern evangelical thought.

It is customary in our day for evangelicals to think of conversion as necessarily an instantaneous thing, and also that conversion is not real unless there is immediate assurance. And neither of these beliefs is exemplified in John Bunyan's portrayal of how Christian began his pilgrimage. You remember how in the city of destruction, Christian began to cry what shall I do to be saved? And evangelists met him and directed him, and yet he was not then converted.

He had first, says Bunyan, to cross a very wide field and to proceed through a slew of death bonds before he came to the wicket gate, the straight gate. And even when he went through that gate, there was somewhat further to go before he obtained the joy of his assurance. We certainly don't have here instantaneous conversion, nor do we have immediate assurance.

Now you understand of course that John Bunyan did not mean his Pilgrim to be a model for all Christian experience. Bunyan was not asserting that the distance between the city of destruction and the wicket gate is the same for everyone. He was not saying that, nor would he want to deny that the conversion of some may be instantaneous and may be followed by immediate joy.

But the opening of Bunyan's Pilgrim's progress does reveal the general consensus of Puritan thought on the subject of conversion. And it is to this subject that I want us to turn our attention in this hour. Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye, two of the Puritan leaders, wrote a preface in the year 1657.

And the words that they included in that preface read as follows. It has been, they say, it has been one of the glories of the Protestant religion that it revived the doctrine of saving conversion. But in a more eminent manner, God has cast the honor thereof upon the ministers and preachers of this nation who are renowned abroad for their more accurate search into and discoveries hereof.

And these words were written in the preface to Thomas Hooker's book, The Application of Redemption, the subtitle, By the Effectual Work of the Word and Spirit of Christ for the Bringing Home of Lost Sinners to God. And I want us to try to make Thomas Hooker the focal point of our thought in what follows. Now Cotton Mather speaks of Hooker as the light of the western churches.

And by the western churches, of course, he means the churches on this side of the Atlantic. And Mather says that if John Cotton was the Melancthon of New England, then Hooker was the Luther. He was a man of mighty vigor, says Mather, and fervor of spirit.

William Ames, one of the great Puritan leaders of Cambridge, who was then exiled to the Netherlands and was professor in Franca. William Ames, who I suppose heard almost all the leading Puritan preachers, he said that he never heard the equal of Thomas Hooker. And John Cotton wrote a poem on Hooker after Hooker's death.

And in this poem, Cotton recalls the three great preachers of Geneva, Calvin, of course, Harold, and Vire, and he speaks of the distribution of different gifts in these three men. And his poem, if I can read it, goes, "Twas of Geneva's worthies said, with wonder, those worthies three, Harold was wont to thunder, Vire like rain, on tender grass to shower, but Calvin, lively oracles to pour. All these in Hooker's spirit did remain, a sun of thunder and a shower of rain, a pourer forth of lively oracles, in saving souls the sun of miracle.' Well, you can read the whole poem.

Hooker was born in 1586 in Leicestershire in England, and he died in July 1647 at Hartford, Connecticut. He went up to the University of Cambridge in England in the year 1604, and I think the simplest way to remember the outline of his life is as follows. From his entrance to university in 1604, his life can be divided into approximately three periods, each of about 15 years.

He stayed at Cambridge for 15 years until 1618, first as a student, during which period he was converted, then as a fellow, a lecturer, in Emanuel College. Emanuel College, which was then the great nursery, the school of the prophet, from which so many men went forth to the pastoral ministry. And in 1618, leaving Cambridge, he commenced a period of another approximately 15 years, preaching in England, finally exiled in 1631 to the Netherlands.

But 15 years of widespread preaching, and particularly in two parishes, one place called Esher near London, and a second pastoral charge at Chelmsford in Essex. If any of you get to England in future months, and you wonder where you should go to see the real flavor of Puritan country, you should of course go to Essex. C. H. Spurgeon spoke of Essex as the Galilee, the Galilee of England.

Well, in the heart of Essex, at Chelmsford, Thomas Hooker had his most eminent pastorate. Cotton Mather says about Hooker's preaching in Chelmsford, there was a great reformation wrought, not only in the town, but in the adjacent country. From all parts whereof, they came to hear the wisdom of the Lord Jesus Christ in his gospel, by this worthy man dispensed.

And Mather says, the Holy Spirit gave wonderful and unusual success unto the ministry wherein he breathed so remarkably. Hooker's preaching was distinguished by many qualities, but I suppose foremost among them was his boldness and the authority with which he spoke. The most noteworthy testimony that was ever given to Hooker was given in a very incidental remark by a man called Giles Furman, a New England minister.

Giles Furman was once speaking on the text that Moses endured seeing him who is invisible, and this is what Furman says. He says, what cares Moses for all the pleasures and honors in Pharaoh's court? He slights them. What cares he for the wrath of the king? Though it be as the roaring of a lion.

Moses makes nothing of him. He, as one said of Mr. Thomas Hooker, a man so awed with the majesty and dread of God, he would put a king in his pocket. Well, a king in the 17th century was a figure of some consequence, and John Thomas Hooker would put a king in his pocket.

Speaking of Hooker, Thomas Goodwin said, if any of our late preachers and divines came in the spirit and power of John the Baptist, this man did. And of course, it's not surprising that preaching of that kind was preaching that stirred up great enmity in the days of Charles I. Hooker was first silenced in 1630, and then he had to flee the country in 1631. He was the chief instrument, says Mather, in the founding of Connecticut.

He died, as I told you, in 1647. Friends standing by his bed at the end sought to encourage him, saying, sir, you are going to receive the reward of your labor. To which Hooker replied, brother, I am going to receive mercy.

Well, I've said enough to indicate to you that Hooker was certainly one of the foremost of the New England Puritans. As an evangelist, as a preacher, he was second to none. It was to his preaching that John Elliot, the apostle to the Indians, owed his conversion.

It was to him that Thomas Shepherd and many others owed a great debt. And it is certainly true that if anyone wants to know the kind of evangelism that was first exercised on this side of the Atlantic, then they need to read Thomas Hooker. Well, what do we read in Thomas Hooker? I have to throw in a word at this point.

There are quite a number of books that were put out under Hooker's name. Unhappily, scarcely one in print today. But his preaching in Chelmsford was taken down by a number of his hearers, and six volumes were printed before 1638.

None of which was recognized by Hooker. They were put out entirely without his authority. Put out, I hope not significantly, but put out by a man by the name of Andrew Crook.

And certainly, certainly this man Crook did not have the blessing of Hooker in these publications. These then were the early books. And of these books, Thomas Goodwin says, having been taken by an unskillful hand, which upon his recess into those remoter parts of the world, that's over here, was bold, was bold without his knowledge or consent to print and publish them.

One of the greatest injuries which can be done to any man. I wonder what he would say about tapes. It came to pass his genuine meaning, and this in points of so higher nature, was diverted in those printed sermons from the fair, clear draft of his own thought and intentions.

Well, at least tapes can't do that. Well, Hooker's sermons then preached on the subject of conversion were printed in England. Then he preached over the same field again in New England.

And these were the sermons which were partly printed in the volume, The Application of Redemption. I mention this point because some of you who read some of the writers on New England, you will find that a great deal of play is made of some of Hooker's early sermons which went out by this Andrew Crook. And I've often found that writers who deal with Hooker scarcely even quote from the one book that he did put out, and that was his Application of Redemption.

Turning then to Hooker's thought on conversion, let us take as our first heading the statement that men are usually prepared for conversion. John Bunyan, as we saw, did not treat Christian's religious experience as beginning when he went through the straight gate. The straight gate was not the beginning of God's dealing with him.

And the Puritans, while they were careful to stipulate that no given length of time is to be laid down, nevertheless they asserted that men are usually prepared before they are converted. And their reason for thinking that was as follows. They argued that no conversion takes place without a real activity on the part of sinners.

The nature of that activity is well set down in the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Divine. Question 85. What does God require of us that we may escape his wrath and curse due to us for sin? And the answer, God requires of us faith in Jesus Christ, repentance unto life with the diligent use of all the outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption.

In other words, the minds and wills of men are active and not passive in conversion. Anthony Burgess complained that the antinomian view of conversion made God to resemble a physician that doth violently open the sick man's throat and pours down his medicine whether he will or no. And the Puritans rejected that view because it represents divine grace as simply bypassing man's rational faculties.

It treats men as less than moral agents. But the New Testament presents faith as an intelligent act. Faith in Christ is the divinely appointed means of deliverance from the evil and curse of sin.

We must receive Christ for our justification in order to escape the sentence of God's holy law upon our disobedience. Saving faith then presupposes a knowledge of sin and a concern to be saved from it. The degree of such concern will vary.

But unless it exists, believing on Christ for justification would be an act without a meaning. In its substance, says John Owen, a previous conviction of sin is found in all that sincerely believe. Now the scriptural evidence that the Puritans advanced to support this position was both general and particular.

The general evidence, briefly, was God's own order in scripture. Law precedes gospel. And the reason for it doing so is that every mouth may be stopped and all the world may become guilty before God.

By the law is the knowledge of sin. And they pointed therefore to the priority of law in the scriptures, in the ministry of John the Baptist and in the ministry of Christ himself. The particular evidence has to do with the descriptions of those who benefit from the gospel.

The gospel is addressed to all men, but it does not benefit all. It benefits the lost, the weary and heavy laden. Not the whole who have no need of a physician, but the sick, the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the blind, the bruised.

Those who are unconscious of sin remain without Christ, for he said that he came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Now these terms which I have just used are not to be understood as though they are descriptive of a certain category of person who is qualified to receive the gospel while others are not. I say they are not to be so understood.

The duty of believing on Christ for salvation belongs at once to every hearer of the gospel. But while the warrant of faith is in God's word and promise and not in anything in ourselves, the text just quoted surely indicate that none obtain good from Christ except those who are convinced of their need. And because men by nature are not convinced, they need to be brought to conviction.

In other words, the Puritans say that as long as men are spiritually ignorant, as long as they are self-confident, as long as they are self-righteous and unconcerned, they cannot be converted. How can ye believe, said our Lord, which receive honour one of another? When man is in a certain condition of self-confidence and pride, he cannot be converted. Listen to Thomas Hooker.

There must, he says, there must be a true sight of sin before the heart can be truly broken for it. A right apprehension goes before thorough contrition. The judgment must be rightly enlightened to see the nature

of our sins before the heart can be pierced with a sense and sorrow that is due.

This is God's way which he takes, in whose hand it is only to do this work. So repenting Ephraim professes, it was the course that the Lord took with him. After I was turned, I repented.

That which the eye does not, that which the eye does not see, the heart feels not. That which is not apprehended by the understanding does not affect the will. Conviction then, he is saying, begins with the mind, comes to the heart and will.

It was for the lack of this conviction, he says, that the woman of Samaria showed such saucy impudency and boldness in speaking with our Saviour. Though she could not be ignorant of those abominable loose haunts of hers that would call to heaven for revenge, but when our Saviour laid his hand upon the saw and let the light shine in her face and points to the vileness of her practice, thou hast had five husbands, but he whom thou now hast is not thy husband. She then became sensible of his sovereign wisdom and of her own wretchedness.

So it was, he says with Paul, when the Lord met him going to Damascus persecuting the saints, he saw not the sinfulness of his course and therefore was unconscious of it. Saul, Saul, says Christ, why persecutest thou me? When he understood the evil of his way, then he stood trembling and astonished saying, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? Now various objections have been raised against the Puritan's teaching at this point and probably the most common is something like this. It is said that if we insist on conviction of sin before conversion, are we not endangering the truth that faith in Christ is the immediate duty of all who hear the gospel? Surely preachers are not called to call men to preparation for conversion, but to call them to conversion itself.

And so it may be added, if we say that anything is necessary in men before conversion, are we not likely to make men look at themselves and look at their own hearts instead of to Christ? Now surely the lessons of church history are such that we must accept that there is force in these questions, but I do not personally believe that they are valid as objections to the Puritan teaching. And for these reasons, which are twofold. Firstly, the Puritans in answering that kind of objection, they would point out from the New Testament itself and from their own practice that there was great variation in God's dealing with men's souls.

They did not believe that conviction of sin follows any stereotyped pattern. The 3,000 at Pentecost were convicted and converted in one day. The Philippian jailer was brought through conviction to conversion in one hour.

In others, the period of time was longer. Hooker believed we are to expect this kind of variety. He says, God deals in divers manners with divers sinners.

Sometimes he says, the Lord suddenly sets on the blow and pierces the soul through at one thrust. Sometimes at one sermon, maybe in the handling of one point, nay, some one sentence or some special truth, the Lord is pleased to arm it and discharge it with mighty and uncontrollable evidence that it astonishes and shivers the heart of the sinner all in pieces. And speaking in another place of sudden conversion, he says, how often have we heard it and known it in our own country? How often has the loose prodigal been drawn in to hear beyond his own purpose, against his own desire and wished himself out of the place and yet sitting in the congregation, he has heard that before he departed, which has been a word of life and peace unto his soul for which he saw cause to bless God to all eternity.

Matthew says Hooker, Matthew is sitting at the receipt of custom, mindful how to take money. Peter and James are casting a net into the sea to see how to make provision for themselves. Christ calls them to himself and so to an interest in grace and glory, when they had not so much as thought of that way.

Well, I'm illustrating as you see that there were no proponents of a sort of stereotyped conversion experience. They were quite familiar with sudden conversion, though they didn't treat it as the norm. Cotton Mather, if you read his account of Hooker and his *Magnalia Americana*, he gives several instances of such conversions under Hooker.

One I remember was this, in Chelmsford once on a market day, Thomas Hooker was preaching a so-called lecture and certain men that had come into the market having had a few drinks, one profane man says Mather, designing some ungodly amusement and merriment, said to his companions, come let us go and hear what that bawling Hooker will say to us and so they went to the church. The man says Mather, the man had not long been in the church before the quick and powerful word of God in the mouth of Hooker pierced the soul of him. He came out with an awakened and a distressed soul and by the further blessing of God upon Mr. Hooker's ministry he arrived at true conversion.

And Mather goes on to say how he then followed Hooker across the Atlantic. So there are these variations, Hooker says similarly speaking of the conversion of Lydia, that God melted her heart sweetly and kindly and he believed that a category of converts who so enter into the kingdom of God and perhaps especially those who are brought up in godly and Christian homes. So Hooker is concerned that he should not be misunderstood at this point and he throws out as every good preacher ought to do a number of illustrations.

He says, you must know however that this work of conviction is wrought in all for the substance of it yet in a different manner in most. Two men are pricked, the one with a pin, the other with a spear. Two men are cut, the one with a pen knife, the other with a sword.

So the Lord deals kindly and gently with one soul and roughly with another. Or another illustration he has, the illustration of a locked door, a locked door which has to be opened. And he says there is no set pattern for dealing with the problem of a lock.

A man may pick the lock or break the lock, open the door and lift up the latch gently or else unhinge it with violence and noise so that all the house and all the town may hear. But it's opened, he said, both ways. Well there have been those in the Protestant tradition who have created a stereotype process of preparation which has been set up as a pattern.

Sometimes people were expected to be so long in the slew of despond and so on. You're familiar I'm sure with that kind of thing. I'm arguing that that was not the Puritan teaching.

And then another reply from the Puritans to this point on preparation. The objection that this idea of preparation puts something between sinners and Christ. Now the Puritan reply to that was simply this.

That it's not a preparatory work that keeps men from Christ, but it's the absence of such a work that's what keeps men from Christ. It is, says Hooker, incident to all men naturally to have a slight apprehension of their sin. And so long as sin is unseen, Christ will be unsought.

The reason he says that men did not receive the invitation to the wedding feast in Christ's parable, the reason was that they were not hunger bitten. They were not conscious of their miserable state nor of the

need they had of the supply of those rich provisions of a saviour. Men by nature have no conception of the worth of Christ.

The reason for the change in the three thousand on the day of Pentecost was not that they had not heard of Christ before. It was because they had not been convicted before. They were pricked in their heart and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, men and brethren, what shall we do? On this text Hooker says, a true sight and sense of a man's sinful condition sets men upon the search, awakens men out of that senseless security in which they are buried, makes them look around them, puts them upon serious consideration of their spiritual condition.

Not long before they scant thought whether they had souls to be saved or sins to be pardoned or mercy and grace to be looked for. They never put it to the question what they could say or show for heaven. But now they begin to think with themselves what they are.

And so it is Hooker says, with many. Before they were convicted they never saw need of reading, hearing, prayer, seeking and inquiry. But now when they find themselves besieged with sins and plagues, heaven frowning, hell gaping, their consciences accusing and themselves dropping down to the grave and their souls to hell, they think it is high time and more than time to stir themselves, to do what they can and to cry for help and direction in so desperate distress and danger.

The whole need not the physician, therefore they do not send for one, nor yet are they willing to receive, nor care to inquire or take any medicine. But when the disease grows fierce and life is in danger, then post out messengers, send far and near for a physician and inquire of every man what may be good. So here says Hooker in Acts 2, men and brethren, said those pierced in the heart, what shall we do? Men then firstly are usually prepared for conversion.

And secondly, the Holy Spirit is the author of this conviction. I am sure that a number of you must have read some of the recent books on the New England Puritans and I think the greatest injustice that has been done to them and it is almost incredible, is the argument of men like Norman Pettit and others, that the Puritans taught that man's will is the agency by which he comes under conviction. You may read that in several modern authors.

Pettit says about Hooker that rarely did he preach to his covenant community without exhorting the unconverted to prepare for grace. Now I'm not surprised that people read that and say well if that's what the Puritans taught they weren't New Testament. Well that's right, if they taught that they certainly weren't New Testament.

But I'm saying they did not teach that. They did not teach anything remotely like that. They taught, as I say, that the Holy Spirit himself is the author of conviction.

Of course they believe that man is convicted by his conscience. But man stifles his conscience. Man holds down the truth in unrighteousness.

He does not like, says the apostle, to retain God in his knowledge. And when men come under conviction of sin, they don't come under it voluntarily. They come by the power of God's spirit.

On the day of Pentecost the multitude who at first derided the apostles, calling them men full of new wine, they came under a change which was not of their own choice. Hooker says it was brought on by the hand of the Almighty. In the entrance whereof they were patience.

It went against the heart and the hair and wholly beyond their purposes and their own expectations. So the words, he says, are in the passive form. They were pricked.

They did not prick themselves. Nay, certainly. Could they have known how to stop it or to remove it? They would never have cried out, what shall we do? It was this conviction from the Holy Spirit which changed their view of things.

When the Spirit comes to reveal sin to the soul and a man to himself, things now begin to be real which seemed formerly to be unreal. Sin becomes another thing. Grace and Godliness, Christ and salvation are other things than formerly they appeared to the soul.

Well there are a number of texts in the New Testament which the Puritans quoted on that subject. I suppose one of the best known was Romans 8.15. He hath not received, says the apostle to the Christians at Rome, he hath not received the spirit of bondage again to fear. They pointed out that those who were brought to Christ came under the spirit of bondage.

They received it, says Hooker. And he goes on, if I had time to read that quotation, to show that although the word of God and the law of God is a hammer, it is only as it is wielded by the spirit that men come under conviction. Hence that phrase, he says, I will send the spirit and he shall convince.

It is his prerogative. He is appointed. By him only it is performed.

Now Thomas Hooker and his Puritan contemporaries, they said a great deal on the work of the spirit in conviction. And the reason they did so was that the subject is not as simple as it might first appear. And in this connection they made two observations which are of great importance.

First, they were careful to assert that people may be disturbed and distressed by a consciousness of sin through natural causes. Ignorant of the terminology of modern psychiatry as they were, they were nevertheless familiar with the varieties of mental illness. And in dealing with conviction of sin, they took care to distinguish it from such depression or melancholy as came from organic or psychiatric causes.

When they came across this kind of depression, they were very ready to recommend the use of medical help. Though of course in our own day the tendency exists to explain all conviction of sin in terms of psychiatry. If a person today was to use the language which Hooker used when he was under conviction at Cambridge quoting the psalmist, he said, when I suffer thy terrors I am distracted.

Remember Job says, terrors are turned upon me. They pursue my soul as the wind. Well, I'm afraid in many places if anyone spoke like that today he would be sent to a clinic for medical help.

But we need to be careful, lest in reacting against the abuse of psychiatry we fail to draw a distinction which the Puritans certainly drew. There are some forms of depression which are certainly organic rather than spiritual. That's the first point in this regard.

Now secondly, in cases where conviction of sin is evidently the work of the Spirit, it is essential not to treat this conviction as proof of saving conversion. Let me repeat that. In cases where conviction of sin is evidently the work of the Spirit, it is essential not to treat this conviction as proof of saving conversion.

A sight and sense of sin brought by the common operations of the Holy Spirit can exist without saving grace. It is possible for men to be pricked in their heart as the multitude on the day of Pentecost and yet

not to go on to receive the gospel. The rich young ruler was sorrowful but he was not converted.

Felix trembled under the word of God but he did not become a Christian. And the New Testament gives many indications that a person may come under the general operations of the Spirit of God without being savingly renewed. Hebrews chapter 6 teaches us that men may be made partakers of the Holy Ghost and taste the good word of God and the powers of the world to come and yet not experience the things which accompany salvation.

For as Peter says in 2 Peter 2 verse 20, men may escape the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and yet their latter end may be worse than the first. That is to say there is a general work of conviction of sin and that work is no proof of saving conversion. Now this is of great importance and especially so in times of revival.

You may recall a great mistake which even the mighty Jonathan Edwards fell into. In 1735 in the great revival in Northampton he describes how the whole town was full of distress and spiritual concern and Edwards spoke of more than 300 souls who were savingly brought home to Christ. But a few years later Edwards had to reconsider his judgment and he had to reconsider it for precisely this reason that men may be under deep conviction of sin and yet never savingly converted.

So Jonathan Edwards wrote those memorable words in 1746. He says in times of great reviving of religion it is as with the fruit trees in the spring. There are a multitude of blossoms all of which appear fair and beautiful and there is a promising appearance of young fruits but many of them are of short continuance.

They soon fall off and never come to maturity. And John Bunyan in that classic again he recognized exactly the same phenomenon. Between the city of destruction and the Wicket Gate Pilgrim met various people.

He met Pliable, met Mr. Worldly Wise Man. They were on their way but they never went through the Wicket Gate. The Puritans taught that when men come under conviction of sin there are three possible results.

The first is conviction may be thrown off as Herod threw it off under the preaching of John the Baptist. Thus says Hooker millions of men perish. They go within a view of Canaan and they never possess it.

Secondly a person may get the burden of conviction off his back by a false belief that he has received Christ. This is the stony ground hearer of the gospel of whom Jesus says he heareth the word and anon with joy receives it yet hath he not root in himself. Some from this category will later fall away from their Christian profession under trials.

Others will remain in the church having the form of godliness without the power. In the words of John Owen they become walking and talking skeletons in religion. Dry sapless useless worldlings.

For describing the same group Robert Bolton says these men they hold on in a plodding course of formal Christianity all their life long and at last depart this life like the foolish virgins. The frequent warnings of scripture and their own experience led the Puritans to believe that there is real danger of men making an unsound profession of faith. Many says Hooker are stillborn not begotten again to a lively hope.

They heal themselves before God heals them. They make application before sound preparation. Not that they can apply too soon if they apply truly but they think they do apply when they neither do nor can.

That's the second group. People who get rid of the burden of conviction by a false belief that they have received Christ and the gospel. And the third group are those in whom conviction of sin is accompanied with or followed by the experience of the saving power of God.

Now I must hasten on my third point is this. The identification of true converts. You can see from what I've said in these last few minutes that this was necessarily a subject of great importance.

The identification of true converts. How is true conversion to be recognized and how are we to know that we are not amongst the foolish virgins. By way of answer to this question several things must be said.

First it is false to say that in being prepared for Christ the person who becomes a true believer has a stronger degree of conviction or of godly fear than others. You see the point. A true convert is not to be identified by the strength of his emotion, the depth of his concern, not at all.

Hooker on one occasion was speaking at a group of ministers and he said that when someone came before the session or the church with an account of their conversion he said some man may come and speak very plainly and ordinarily without any emotion. Another may come with a flood of tears. He says the man who has no tears may well be the sounder convert.

The strength of conviction is no indication of the reality of saving experience. Giles Furman says he was once in a shipwreck in the month of December and as the boat was going down on the rocks at midnight he heard a seaman cry out I shall be in hell before the morning. But he wasn't.

He was saved and three days later says Furman he was as drunk as ever. Men can use that kind of language and be in real genuine fear and yet it can come to nothing. The strength of conviction is no indication.

And then secondly it has to be observed that there's no certain way whereby the professed conversion of others can be recognized. That of course should be obvious. In the New Testament if there was any certain way of avoiding false converts entering the church it would have been employed.

But as we know in the New Testament churches there were those who having made profession went back. They went out, Thomas says the Apostle John that they were not of us. For if they had been of us they would have no doubt continued with us.

I mention that simply then to underline that when we've said all that we can it has to remain solemnly true that it does not belong to the prerogatives of any man to be sure of the conversion of others. Now that does not mean that we can assume a laxity in our judgment. On the contrary, Hooker says, don't quickly give approbation to professors.

Be not suddenly confident of the cure. Let men, he says, let men be probationers in our apprehensions until they have shown more of the state of their hearts by the manner in which they live. Thirdly then on the identification of true converts, I will try and summarize this I think in my own words.

The difference between a true and a spurious convert is of course the difference between the regenerating power of the Spirit of God and the absence of that power. In other words the distinction is to be made with the conviction that made Felix tremble, the conviction that may come upon all men between that and the imparting of a new principle of life in the soul. And it is when that new life is imparted that, as the Puritans would have said, a divorce takes place between the sinner and the love of sin.

The terms of discipleship are too high for the unregenerate man, because Christ says a disciple has to be satisfied with him so that he is ready to part with all for Jesus' sake. And for the person who has come under the regenerating power of the Spirit and seen the glory of Christ, that price is not too high. To obtain the pearl of great price he is willing to sell all.

A true convert has a changed relationship to sin and to holiness. The true convert, says Hooker, argues, it's not necessary I should not be poor, imprisoned, despised. It's absolutely necessary I should not be sinful.

I have no charge from God that I should not have and lose my life, my liberty, but I have a charge without all exception that I should leave my sin. And this new relation to sin is not grievous to a Christian. Hooker says, should I carry this proud, stubborn, rebellious heart to heaven with me, heaven would be hell to me.

The true convert has a new principle of holiness. A hundred years after Hooker died, David Braynard, preaching amongst the Indians at Cross Weeksong in New Jersey, two Indians professed conversion and they came to Braynard. They said that they had comfort from the gospel, but they wanted more.

And Braynard asked them what more they wanted God to do for them. To which they replied, they wanted Christ should wipe their hearts quite clean. The love of holiness, the longing to be like Christ and to be like God.

Now I must hasten to my fourth head, which is the place of regeneration and of human responsibility in conversion. And I must somehow abbreviate myself even with Mr. Patterson's kindness in giving me these extra minutes. I think I will pass over the evidence that the Puritans taught the usual, the common, the accepted reformed doctrine of regeneration.

Notwithstanding all that Norman Patterson and these other men say, if you read Hooker for yourself, you will find that the doctrine of regeneration by God's sovereign irresistible power is as clear as daylight in Thomas Hooker. They believed that man was active in conversion, but passive in the moment of regeneration. Active before regeneration, active about regeneration, but in the point and the moment of regeneration it is the sovereign and exclusive work of God's Holy Spirit.

To which they added these corollaries, that the new birth regeneration is a profound spiritual mystery. We don't know the time of it. It's of our natural birth, Hooker says, that David says, I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Much more may it be said of our new birth and the Puritans were very emphatic upon the truth that the moment of regeneration is not instantly recognizable. Charles Thurman says that there is no ground in Scripture for the position that all that are new born know the time of their new birth. What divine, he says, that did deserve the name of a gospel minister did ever deliver such a doctrine.

Well, Richard Baxter said on one occasion that he did not know the day nor the year of his conversion. And a number of Puritan ministers spoke similarly. And Jonathan Edwards said that even when people believe they are sure of the time of their regeneration, they may well be wrong.

Edwards says many are doubtless ready to date their conversion wrong. Throwing by, throwing aside these lesser degrees of light that appeared at first and calling some more remarkable experience they had afterwards their conversion. Well, what I'm saying now is that the Puritans taught that the time of a man's rebirth is of no importance.

What is of importance is the reality of his conversion. To which they added that although the new birth is the sovereign act of God, it is not caused by our endeavors. It is man's full responsibility to seek Christ and to believe the gospel.

We are to strive to enter in at the straight gate. We are to pray. We are to seek labor, says our Lord, labor for the meat which perisheth not.

And you will find that strong emphasis in the Puritans. They preached man's inability, his need of divine grace at the same time they preached not simply that men may believe but that they must believe. They preached simultaneously these two truths that we are commanded to repent and to believe the gospel and also that of ourselves we are unable to do so.

Listen to Hooker on that. You will say, he says, after he's been speaking about inability, what shall I do? Come, he says, come and bring thy soul into God's presence and lay thyself down in his sight and tell the Lord that thou art a traitor and which is worse thou canst not but be so. That this is thy misery, make known the base abominations of thy heart and life before the Lord and all that opposition which thou findest in thy soul to Christ.

Beseech him that he would do for thee what thou canst not do for thyself. Tell him that he said he will take away the heart of stone and that it is not in thy power to put it away and therefore leave thy soul there, beseeching him to make known himself as a God-hearing prayer. Look to Jesus Christ and beseech him that hath the keys of hell and of death that he would unlock those brazen gates and doors of thy heart.

And I must follow that quotation with one almost final one. Lest you think that Hooker puts prayer in the place of justification by faith, listen to him preaching justification. He says, God does not justify a poor sinner for anything he has nor for anything he does.

If a man could weep his eyes in sorrow, if a man could hunger and thirst for Christ more than for his daily bread, God would not justify a sinner for all these things. How does God then justify a man? Why, he justifies a sinner for what Christ has done for him. The surety has paid it and he accounts it ours.

This one doctrine he says, supplies in all wants courage. I know, he says, what troubles you. You say, will this blind mind never be enlightened? I think I shall never be able to conceive of the truths of God aright.

How can the Lord accept me when I condemn myself? I have thought sometimes, you say, but God cannot be just if he does not condemn me. Why, I say to you, who are burdened thus. Dost thou go out of thyself for the pardon of thy sin? Why, go comforted.

The Lord will justify thee, not for thy works, but for Christ's merit. Thou hast committed all iniquity. Christ has performed all righteousness.

Thou hast nothing of thyself. Christ hath enough for thee. And thou art not justified for what thou hast or dost, but for what the Lord Jesus Christ doth.

Look up to him therefore. Bring him to God's tribunal to answer for thee, that when Satan will bring his charges against thee. Say, what, and say to you, what do you hope to go to heaven? Do you not know that every sinner must die? Why, answer Satan again.

That is true. It is true I can do nothing, but Christ has done all for me. And what canst thou say to the Lord Jesus? My time is gone, my friends.

You must read Thomas Hooker for yourself, and I greatly hope that you will. Shall we close with a word of prayer? Oh Lord, our gracious God, we pray that thou wouldst enable us to be still before thee. We thank thee for thy saving power.

We thank thee that thou didst come to us when we sought thee not. We thank thee that thou art the builder and the maker of all things. We pray thy blessing again upon our gathering together.

May thy Holy Spirit constrain us in minds and hearts, that we may know thee, that we may love thee, that thy work in this place may be further established to thy glory. That in our lives and in our churches and in our homes, we may live to the praise of the glory of thy grace. Receive our thanks and praise, and pardon all our sins, for Jesus' sake.

Amen.

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