

Conviction

by Oswald J. Smith

True conversions occur when people are convicted of their sin and then exhort to trust and exercise faith in Christ.

Scripture: Psalm 51:17, Isaiah 57:15, Matthew 5:4, Luke 18:13, John 16:8, Acts 2:37, Romans 3:23, 2 Corinthians 7:10, James 4:8, 1 John 1:9

Topics: "Conviction of Sin", "True Revival"

Description

Oswald J. Smith emphasizes the critical role of deep conviction of sin in genuine revivals, contrasting it with the superficial methods of modern evangelism that lack true spiritual depth. He argues that without the Holy Spirit's work in convicting individuals of their sin, efforts to lead them to Christ are often fruitless and result in shallow conversions. Smith laments the absence of heartfelt repentance and the urgency that should accompany a sinner's cry for salvation, advocating for a return to a more profound understanding of sin and the need for redemption. He calls for a revival that stirs true anguish for sin, leading to authentic conversions that endure over time. Ultimately, he stresses that true evangelism must be rooted in the conviction of sin, allowing the Holy Spirit to prepare hearts before calling individuals to faith in Christ.

Transcript

THERE is one thing that was always prominent in the great Revivals of past days, viz., a deep and a true conviction of sin. And it is one of the vital elements that is lacking today.

How disappointing are the methods of present-day Evangelism! How shallow and unreal when compared with the genuine work of the Spirit! All this pressing, coaxing, urging; standing up, raising the hand, coming to the front, etc., all such public display as it is carried on in modern campaigns, is surely not the work of the Holy Spirit.

Not that pleading with men is unscriptural. God forbid! But with conviction absent it is fruitless. And modern Evangelism with its chilling irreverence, uncalled for slang, and spirit-grieving frivolity, let alone its lamentable professionalism, can by no means lead up to conviction of sin and result in a spiritual outcome.

Where there is genuine conviction of sin it is not necessary to urge, coax or press in the energy of the flesh; sinners will come without being asked; they will come because they must. Those who go home from the meeting unable to eat or sleep because of deep conviction do not need to be coaxed and urged to seek relief.

In the modern campaign the evangelist calls upon people to accept Christ, and rightly so. But oh, that we could hear sinners calling upon Christ to accept them! People take salvation today in such a cold, formal, matter-of-fact, business-like sort of way, that it appears as though they are doing God an honor in condescending to receive His offer of Redemption. Their eyes are dry, their sense of sin absent; nor is there any sign of penitence and contrition. They look upon it as a manly thing to do. But oh, if there were conviction! if they came with hearts bowed down, yea! broken and contrite, came with the cry of the guilt-laden soul: "God be merciful to me a sinner!"--came trembling with the burning life and death question of the Philippian jailor: "What must I do to be saved ?"--what converts they would be!

But in our Twentieth Century Evangelism such is not the case. Men are urged to be saved before they know they are lost, to believe without being convicted of their need. The fruit is picked before it is ripe, and of course the work is bound to come undone. If we are to get Holy Spirit Fruit, God must prepare the ground, the Holy Spirit must convict of sin before men can truly believe. It is right to tell people to believe when God has done His work in their hearts, but first they must feel their need.

Let us wait until the Spirit of God has done His part before we say: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." Let us first see the signs of conviction as in the case of the Philippian jailor. And when their anguish is so deep that they are forced to cry aloud: "What must I do to be saved ?" then we will know that they are ready to be exhorted to trust and exercise faith in Christ, but not until then.

"There is another Gospel, too popular in the present day, which seems to exclude conviction of sin and repentance from the scheme of Salvation; which demands from the sinner a mere intellectual assent to the fact of his guilt and sinfulness, and a like intellectual assent to the fact and sufficiency of Christ's atonement; and such assent yielded, tells him to go in peace, and to be happy in the assurance that the Lord Jesus has made all right between his soul and God; thus crying peace, peace, when there is no peace.

"Flimsy and false conversions of this sort may be one reason why so many who assume the Christian profession dishonor God and bring reproach on the church by their inconsistent lives, and by their ultimate relapse into worldliness and sin. The whole counsel of God must be declared. 'By the law is the knowledge of sin.' Sin must be felt before it can be mourned. Sinners must sorrow before they can be comforted. True conversions are the great want of the times. Conversions such as were common once, and shall be again, when the church shakes off her lethargy, takes hold upon God's strength, and brings down the ancient power. Then, as of old, sinners will quail before the terror of the Lord."--J. H. Lord.

Would we think of calling a doctor before we were sick? Do we urge people who are well and strong to hasten to the physician? Does the man who is swimming well beseech those on the shore to come and save him? Certainly not! But let sickness come, and at once we feel our need and a doctor is called. We know that we require a remedy. When we feel ourselves sinking below the surface, and realize that we are drowning, we will then soon call for help, and oh, the agony through which we pass as we find ourselves going down and know that unless some one saves us, we are lost and must perish!

So it is with a perishing soul. When a man is convicted of his lost condition he will cry out in the bitter anguish of his heart: "What must I do to be saved?" He will need no urging, no coaxing; it is a matter of life or death to him, and he will do anything to be saved.

So you see I am not talking about an Evangelistic campaign. That is frequently man's work, and sometimes entirely so. But this Revival--oh, the glory of it! all, all of God! Man has no room for honor here.

While these special evangelistic services--how different they are! Great excitement, much outward joy, scores of reported converts, and then--a spurious outcome, a false state. This "accepting Christ" theory without conviction, a head belief, but no New Birth, no "Born Again" experience--what a mockery it is!

It is this lack of conviction that results in a spurious Revival, and causes the work to come undone. It is one thing to hold up the hand and sign a decision card, but it is quite another thing to get saved. Souls must be brought into clear and abiding liberty if the work is to last. It is one thing to have hundreds of professed converts during the excitement of the campaign, but it is another thing to come back five years after and find them still there.

John Bunyan understood it well when he pictured Christian with his great load of sin on his back, and described his exercise of soul until he got rid of his burden at the foot of the Cross.

God has placed His own value on His word. He calls it a "Fire," a "Hammer" and a "Sword." Now fire burns; a blow from a hammer hurts; while a cut from a sword causes real pain. And when His Word is proclaimed in the power of the Anointing it will have exactly the same results. It will burn like a fire, break like a hammer and pierce like a sword, and the spiritual or mental pain will be just as severe and real as the physical. And if not,--then there is something wrong either with the messenger or the message.

"Were a person who had committed an awful crime to be suddenly arrested; were his guilt brought home to his conscience by some messenger of justice, in the pointed language of Holy Writ, 'Thou art the man;' it would be perfectly natural for the culprit to turn pale, to falter in his speech, to tremble, and to present every symptom of real agony and distress. When Belshazzar, the proud Assyrian monarch, saw the appearance of a man's hand writing upon the plaster of the wall of his palace, his countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed and his knees smote one against another. And the effects have never yet been deemed unnatural. Why then should it be thought strange to behold sinners who have been powerfully awakened by the Spirit of God, who are so deeply convinced of the enormity of their crimes as to apprehend they are every moment in danger of dropping into the burning lake, who imagine that hell is moved from beneath to meet them at their coming, why should it be thought unnatural for such persons to discover outward symptoms of the alarming distress and agitation felt within?" -- Memoir of Wm. Bramwell.

Such has been the experience of God's servants all down the centuries. In every Revival there has been deep conviction of sin. Some of the records sound strange indeed to those who have known and studied nothing but Twentieth Century Evangelism. Incidents such as the following were common to these men.

"About the middle of the sermon a man cried out. I fell to prayer, nor could we preach any more for cries and tears all over the chapel."--Thos. Collins.

"Cries for mercy rang all over the chapel. Before the sermon was done, I with many others, fell upon my knees to implore Salvation."--One of Thos. Collins' Converts.

"The sermon was swallowed up in victory. Seekers left their pews, and trooping, unbidden, up the aisles, knelt around the communion rail." -- Thos. Collins.

"A Quaker who stood by was not a little displeased at the dissimulation of these creatures, and was biting his lips and knitting his brows, when he dropped down as thunder-struck. The agony he was in was even terrible to behold. We besought God not to lay folly to his charge, and he soon lifted up his head and cried

aloud, 'Now I know thou art a prophet of the Lord.' " --John Wesley.

"J. H. was a man of regular life and conversation, one that constantly attended public prayers and sacrament, and was zealous for the church, and against dissenters of every denomination. Being informed that people fell into strange fits at the societies, he came to see and judge for himself. But he was less satisfied than before; inasmuch, that he went about to see his acquaintances one after another till one o'clock in the morning, and labored above measure to convince them it was a delusion of the devil.

"We were going home when one met us in the street, and informed us that J. H. was fallen raving mad.

"It seems he sat down to dinner, but had in mind first to end the sermon he had borrowed on Salvation by Faith. In reading the last page, he changed colour, fell off his chair and began screaming terribly, and beating himself against the ground.

"The neighbors were alarmed and flocked together to the house. Between one and two I came in and found him on the floor, the room being full of people whom his wife would have kept without, but he cried out aloud, 'No, let them all come, let all the world see the just judgment of God.' Two or three men were holding him as best they could. He immediately fixed his eyes upon me, and stretching out his hand cried, 'Aye, this is he who I said was a deceiver of the people. But God has overtaken me. I said it was all a delusion. But this is no delusion.' He then roared out, 'O, thou devil! thou cursed devil! yea, thou legion of devils! thou canst not stay. Christ will cast thee out! I know His work is begun. Tear me to pieces if thou wilt, but thou canst not hurt me !' He then beat himself against the ground again, his breast heaving at the same time, as in the pangs of death, and great drops of sweats trickling down his face.

"We all betook ourselves to prayer; his pangs ceased and both his body and soul were set at liberty."--John Wesley.

"The power of God was present. They came to be saved, and were not disappointed. The sobs and cries were wonderful. It seemed as if God had come down in terror and power; as if the Spirit were passing through every region of every soul, diffusing Himself through all its capacities, and recesses; throwing light into the understanding, assailing and subverting the fortress of sin in the heart; revealing Himself as the antagonist of sin--disturbing and tracking it in all its windings--stirring the soul to its depths, drawing it slowly, but surely, to a crisis--piling up these sentences of condemnation, one upon another, until the whole soul, collecting all its energies into one out-cry for mercy, exclaimed, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner, what must I do to be saved? Save, Lord, or I perish! O, save or I sink into hell. Heal my soul for I have sinned against Thee !'--James Caughey.

"The power of God seemed to descend upon the assembly like a mighty, rushing wind, and with an astonishing energy bore down all before it. I stood amazed at the influence, which seized the audience almost universally; and could compare it to nothing more apt than the irresistible force of a mighty torrent or a swelling deluge that with its insupportable weight and pressure bears down and sweeps before it whatever comes in its way. Almost all persons of all ages were bowed down with concern together, and scarcely one was able to withstand the shock of this surprising operation; old men and women, who had been drunken wretches for many years and some little children, not more than six or seven years of age, appeared in distress for their souls, as well as persons of middle age.

"The most stubborn hearts were now obliged to bow. A principal man among the Indians, who, before, was most secure and self-righteous, and thought his state good, because he knew more than the

generality of the Indians had formerly done, and who with a great degree of confidence the day before told me he had been a Christian more than ten years, was now brought under solemn concern for his soul and wept bitterly. Another man advanced in years, who had been a murderer, a conjurer, and a notorious drunkard, was likewise brought now to cry for mercy with many tears, and to complain much that he could be no more concerned when he saw his dangers so very great.

"They were almost universally praying and crying for mercy in every part of the house, and many out of doors, and numbers could neither go nor stand. Their concern was so great, each one for himself, that none seemed to take any notice of those about them, but each prayed freely for himself."--David Brainerd.

"A young Indian woman, who, I believe, never knew before that she had a soul, nor ever thought of any such thing, hearing that there was something strange among the Indians, came to see what was the matter. On the way to the Indians she called at my lodgings; and, when I told her that I designed presently to preach to the Indians, she laughed and seemed to mock; but went however to them.

"I had not proceeded far in my public discourse before she felt effectually that she had a soul, and before I had concluded my discourse, was so convinced of her sin and misery and so distressed with concern for her soul's salvation that she seemed like one pierced through with a dart, and she cried out incessantly. She could neither go nor stand, nor sit on her seat without being held up.

"After public service was over, she lay flat on the ground praying earnestly, and would take no notice of, nor give any answer to, any who spoke to her. I hearkened to what she said, and perceived the burden of her prayer to be 'Have mercy on me and help me give you my heart.' Thus she continued praying incessantly for hours together."--David Brainerd.

"In the midst of my discourse I saw a powerful looking man fall from his seat. As he sunk he groaned and then cried or shrieked out, that he was sinking to hell. He repeated that several times. Of course this created a great excitement. It broke up my preaching; and so great was his anguish that we spent the rest of our time in praying for him. The next morning I inquired for him; and found that he had spent a sleepless night in great anguish of mind."--Chas. G. Finney.

"The chapel was crowded to excess. The Word was 'quick and powerful,' numbers 'were pricked in their hearts,' and in the agony of conviction cried mightily for mercy. The sermon was followed by a prayer meeting. Midnight arrived and the penitents were still upon their knees, resolved to plead till they prevailed. As one and another found peace through believing and withdrew, others whose hearts were stricken filled their places. So intense was the Awakening, that though the squire had retired, the alarmed and sorrowing people could not be induced to leave the chapel, but all night through, and all through the following day and night, the prayer meeting continued without intermission. It was supposed that over one hundred persons were converted, whilst many an old professor received quickening and gave himself to God by a fuller consecration."--Memoir of Squire Brooke.

"Had the preacher fired upon the people with grapeshot, the wounded had not been more numerous, or the cry of anguish more bitter. It was simply impossible to proceed with the discourse. Leaving the pulpit the Squire came down amongst the people to gather the praying men for intercession, whilst he conversed with penitents and endeavoured to assist them into the kingdom."--Memoir of Squire Brooke.

"While engaged in prayer, two of those who came in were awakened and began to cry for mercy.

"No sooner had she communicated the tidings, than her sister was cut to the heart and began to cry for mercy.

"While I was praying, the power of God descended and he and his penitent companion were cut to the heart and wept aloud for their sins.

"While talking with an old woman sixty years of age, she was soon cut to the heart, and in a very short time the Lord set her soul at liberty.

"In visiting from house to house, I fell in with a young woman, to whom I had not spoken many words before she was pricked in the heart and cried for mercy, as one hanging over the pit of hell.

"I had not spoken many words to her before she burst into tears and loud cries. She continued to groan under the weight of her guilty load. The cries and wailings of her broken heart were deeply affecting."--Wm. Carvosso.

"The spirit of the Lord was poured out abundantly and many cried aloud for mercy. Near the close he was like a flame of fire; the people burst into tears on every side, and could say, 'Lo, God is here, of a truth! Many cried, yea groaned, aloud for mercy, and God delivered them. Many were deeply convicted and cried out for mercy; an old woman about seventy years of age, was struck in a moment. She fell to the ground, making a frightful noise, and continued speechless and in an agony for above an hour. When she came to herself she jumped off the chair on which she had been placed, clapped her hands, and praised the Lord."--Memoir of Wm. Bramwell.

"I had not discoursed long when the congregation melted into tears. This abated for a few minutes, till a little boy about seven or eight years of age cried out exceeding piteously indeed and wept as though his little heart would break. I asked the little boy what he cried for. He answered 'my sins !' I then asked him what he wanted. He answered, 'Christ!'

"Others were so earnest for a discovery of the Lord to their souls that their eager crying obliged me to stop, and I prayed over them, as I saw their agonies and distress increase. Oh, the distress and anguish of their souls! oh, the pains that were upon them!

"Many of the assembled were deeply affected, groaning and sobbing; there was a great weeping and mourning." --Wm. Bramwell.

"When the conviction as to its mental process reaches its crisis, the person, through weakness, is unable to sit or stand, and either kneels or lies down. A great number of convicted persons in this town and neighborhood, and now I believe in all directions in the north where the Revival prevails, are "smitten down" as suddenly and they fall as nerveless and paralyzed and powerless, as if killed instantly by a shotgun. They fall with a deep groan, some with a wild cry of horror--the greater number with the intensely earnest plea, 'Lord Jesus, have mercy on my soul !' The whole frame trembles like an aspen leaf, an intolerable weight is felt upon the chest, a choking sensation is experienced and relief from this found only in the loud, urgent prayer for deliverance, usually the bodily distress and mental anguish continue till some degree of confidence in Christ is found. Then the look, the tone, the gestures, instantly change. The aspect of anguish and despair is changed for that of gratitude, and triumph, and adoration. The language and the looks, and terrible struggles, and loud desperate deprecation, tell convincingly, as the parties themselves declare, that they are in deadly conflict with the old serpent. The perspiration rolls off the

anguished victims; their very hair is moistened. Some pass through this exhausting conflict several times; others but once. There is no appetite for food; many will eat nothing for a number of days. They do not sleep, though they may lie down with their eyes shut."--The Irish Revival 1859.

'The power of the Lord's spirit became so mighty upon their souls as to carry all before it, like the rushing mighty wind of Pentecost. Some were screaming out in agony; others--and among these strong men--fell to the ground as if they had been dead. I was obliged to give out a psalm, our voices being mingled with the mourning and groans of many prisoners sighing for deliverance.'" --Wm. Burns.

"A revival always includes conviction of sin on the part of the church. Back-slidden professors cannot wake up and begin right away in the service of God without deep searchings of heart. The fountains of sin need to be broken up. In a true Revival, Christians are always brought under such conviction; they see their sins in such a light that often they find it impossible to maintain a hope of their acceptance with God. It does not always go to that extent, but there are always, in a genuine Revival, deep convictions of sin, and often cases of abandoning all hope." --Chas. G. Finney.

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