

Ongoing Conversion

<i>Text</i>	Ephesians 4:22-24
<i>Readings</i>	Romans 6:1-14; Ephesians 4:17-24
<i>Theme</i>	Believers are to go on putting off our old selves, that are being corrupted and to put on our new selves so we may be righteous and holy.
<i>Purpose</i>	To explain what this means and urge you to do it.
<i>Confession</i>	Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 33

All of us have heard the word "conversion". The word describes a change from one state to another, and it can be applied to a number of different fields:

- In rugby a conversion is when a player completes a try by kicking the ball over the rail and between the posts.
- When applied to electricity it refers to changing alternating current into direct current.
- For mechanics it refers to altering a car engine to improve its performance.
- For builders it refers to major alterations made to a house.
- For Christians it means turning from unbelief to God; from sin to obedience; it refers to a great change that takes place in the heart, mind and life of a person. This is our subject for today.

People are converted to Christ in different ways and by different means. There is no one set pattern and we should not expect a person to conform to one mould. Some people have sudden and dramatic conversions, like Saul on the Damascus road. But for most people their conversion to faith in Jesus is slow and gradual. However it happens, conversion marks the beginning of your life as a Christian; this is where it starts.

The word "conversion" not only describes the beginning of the Christian life but also our ongoing progress as Christians. Lord's Day 33 of the Heidelberg Catechism says that genuine conversion is ongoing and continuous and progressive.

The apostle Paul looked back to the point of conversion in the lives of the believers in Ephesus. In verse 20 he wrote about how they had come "to know Christ"; and in verse 21 he wrote; "Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus." This is how they began as Christians. But they needed to keep going. He tells us that every Christian must be busy doing three things:

1. You must put off your old self
2. Your mind must be renewed
3. You must put on your new self.

1. Put off your old self

a. The old self describes a person under the control of sin. It is the whole personality as ruled by sin, the unregenerate self, the old sinful nature.

This old self is associated with "your former way of life", which Paul described in verses 17-19. Before they came to faith those gentile unbelievers were futile in their thinking, darkened in their understanding, separated from God, ignorant of God's truth, and hard of heart. They were under the control of sin and slaves of Satan.

This old self came from Adam. From him we inherit a sinful nature. We are born sinners. Sin is like a hereditary disease passed on from father to son, mother to daughter, from one generation to the next.

b. This old self is “being corrupted by its deceitful desires.”

i. There is nothing wrong with a desire. You may desire to do well at school, to pass your exams, to be a great cook, to find a job, to be of service to others. All of these may be good desires.

ii. But there are other desires that arise out of our sinful nature.

They are “deceitful” in that they promise much but deliver little; they seem to offer gold but you only end up with ashes.

They deceive us, fool us, trick us. That is the nature of temptation – it looks good on the outside but after we have done the deed it turns out to be all wrong and we are disappointed and dissatisfied.

Think of David after his adultery with Bathsheba, or Amnon after he raped his half-sister Tamar. (2 Samuel 13) Sinful desires are always deceitful.

iii. These deceitful desires corrupt the old self of the unbeliever. (vs 22b) The old self “is being corrupted” – a present tense verb; this corruption is going on all the time. If you do not yet believe in the Lord Jesus and have not been converted then your old self is decaying, it is rotting, it is getting worse and worse and you are digging yourself deeper and deeper into sin. If this describes you then you must wake up and repent and turn to God and be converted!

c. But the Christian has put off this old self.

i. If you believe in the Lord Jesus then this has already happened. The verb “lay aside” or “put off” is an aorist, which refers to a past event. You could translate it; “you have laid aside your old self.” That happened when you were converted, when you repented of sin and believed in Jesus.

At that point you trusted in what Jesus did on the cross and were united with him in his death. When he died your old sinful nature died there with him. It was put to death because you were crucified with Christ. This is what we remember regularly in the Lord’s Supper – that Jesus died in our place, for our sins, so that we can be rid of our old sinful self.

So this has already happened, in principle.

ii. But this also needs to work out in practice in our lives. The word translated as “put off” described taking off clothing. The writer of Hebrews used the same word when he urged his readers; “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” (Hebrews 12:1) They needed to keep doing that and so do we.

Compare this as a man who has been in prison for many years. During his imprisonment he has come to regret his crime and he wants to live a new life. One day he is released. He takes off his prison clothes and puts on new clothing and goes out into his new life. He is now free. But in spite of his new situation he still carries with him the thinking and habits of his prison life. In principle he is free; in practice he will have to keep putting off the prison life so as to live his new life, and that is not easy.

It is the same for the Christian. In principle we have put off the old sinful self, but in practice we have to keep putting off those things, keep getting rid of them, and that is not easy for us either.

iii. At this point in his letter Paul is still dealing with general principles. In the following verses he is more specific: put off falsehood (verse 25); don't steal (verse 28); "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice" (verse 31). All of us struggle with specific sins. Through our union with Christ we need to keep putting these off, every day, in our speech, work, study, marriage, and family life.

The catechism says that the dying away of the old self means "to be genuinely sorry for sin, to hate it more and more, and to run away from it." (Question 89)

Are you sorry for your sin? Often we are sorry that we got caught, that we were found out! Or we are sorry for ourselves because we have been punished; we are sorry about the consequences of our actions.

Are you genuinely sorry for sin? Do you hate it more and more? Are you running away from it?

2. Your mind must be renewed

Verse 23 reads; "to be made new in the attitude of your minds". This phrase highlights the importance of our minds.

a. The immoral living of the unbeliever arises from the futility of their thinking. (verses 17-19) They are ignorant of God and darkened in their understanding and that leads to an immoral life. Sinful thinking will lead to sinful behaviour.

b. By contrast the moral living of the believer arises from having been made new in the attitude of our minds.

The Greek word translated "made new" or "renewed" is the only use of this word in the New Testament.

The verb is passive, which means that this is something done to us by the Holy Spirit. He has given us a new mind, a new way of thinking, a new way of looking at things.

By this is something you and I need to work at as well. Paul urged the Christians in Rome to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds." (Romans 12:2) God is active in us but you and I must also be busy with this.

The verb is also in the present tense which means that this too is ongoing and continuous. We must be busy with this all the time, every day, every week, every year.

c. The ongoing conversion of our lives is directed by our minds. Renewed thinking will produce renewed lives. Holiness of life begins with our thoughts, our reasoning.

Often we are using our minds to search for ways to please ourselves and to fulfil our selfish desires. We think long and hard so we can justify our sins and excuse our wrongs.

Instead, we need to think long and hard about how we can get rid of sin and live a holy life. “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” (Colossians 3:2) Think about “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...” (Philippians 4:8)

Our lives will run in the tracks laid out by our minds. So discipline your mind; read the Bible regularly so your mind is filled with the Word of God. Come to worship faithfully to learn what you do not know and to be reminded of what you have forgotten. “Be made new in the attitude of your minds.”

3. Put on the new self

a. The new self is not the old self touched up a bit, smartened, painted to look good on the outside, or improved a little.

Rather the new self is a person completely renewed from the inside out by the Holy Spirit.

If you have been converted you have been born again; you have a new heart, a new mind, a new will, and new emotions. Instead of being under the rule of Satan you are under the rule of Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:17 reads; “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come.”

b. This has already happened. When Paul wrote in verse 24, “put on the new self”, he again used an aorist verb; he described a past event – you have put on the new self. Through faith we are united with Jesus in his death so that we have died to sin, and we are united with him in his resurrection so that “just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too may live a new life.” (Romans 6:4) “...if we died with Christ we believe we will also live with him.” (Romans 6:8) As a Christian you are no longer controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit of God living in you. (Romans 8:9) This has happened in principle.

c. But this also needs to keep on going.

You must be what you are. You are a Christian and so you must live like Christ. You have been converted and so you must show that in your life.

Again Paul is giving us the general principle here but later on, he spells out the details: speak the truth (verse 25); build each other up (verse 29); “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other” (verse 32).

Paul uses the same word in Ephesians 6:14 when he urges us to “put on the breastplate of righteousness” (ESV); and again in Colossians 3:12 where he tells us to put on “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience”; and again in Romans 13:14 where he exhorts us to put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

The catechism says the putting on the new self “is a wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a delight to do every kind of good as God wants us to.” (Question 90)

Does that describe you? Are you putting on the new self? Do you delight to do good? Are you obeying God's commands? Do you show the fruit of the Spirit in your character?

d. Paul concludes this section by telling us what the new self will look like: it is "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

Again it is an aorist verb; this has already happened; this is how God has recreated us.

And it is a passive verb; this is God's work and action. Through the saving work of the Lord Jesus God has recreated us to be like Jesus in true righteousness and holiness.

There is an expression, "Clothing makes the man". That is true. Think of Joseph taken out of prison and given a wash and a shave and dressed up in good clothes so he could meet Pharaoh.

This is what God has done for us by clothing us in the white righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ so that we can meet God as holy in Christ.

If you are a Christian you have been converted. This took place when you first believed in Jesus, but it is also an ongoing process of putting off the old self, of being renewed in your mind, and putting on the new self.

This is genuine conversion. Has this happened to you? If it has, is this still going on in your life?

Amen