

How Parents Influence Your View of God

The problem of belief in God has never been solely to convince the conscious mind. If it were, He would need only to raise up brilliant debaters and apologists rather than pastors and churches that nurture. Paul wrote, "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. 10:10, KJV).

It is easy to confuse deep, heartfelt conviction with mere intellectual assent and to think salvation is thereby accomplished. I do not mean to say that anyone's conversion experience is thereby invalid, but that it did not finish the process. We have been too easily convinced of completion.

When belief in the heart, to whatever degree, opens the floodgates of understanding to the mind and conviction to the spirit, and we respond in the sinner's prayer to invite Jesus in, we are redeemed and justified. Our sins are washed away in the blood of the Lamb and our destinies are changed from hell to heaven. We are once and for all time fully saved.

But the experience of conversion is not all there is to being saved. Salvation has a larger meaning than justification, redemption, being born anew, going to heaven or all these put together.

Unbelieving Saints

Redemption, justification, being born anew are entrances to the process of growing into **salvation** (1 Pet. 2). Going to **heaven** is the end product. All of what happens in between, the process of **sanctification** and **transformation**, is the major part of salvation, which means "to become whole, to be healed."

When we ask, "Have you been saved, brother?" we mean redeemed, justified, born anew and going to heaven. Well and good. But perhaps the question is confusing. If we mean, "Has the Lord gotten hold of you, paid the price, and set your face toward heaven?" every born-anew Christian ought to answer with an unqualified, "Yes, I'm saved, and I'm going to heaven."

But concerning the process in this life of being saved, none ought ever to reply that it is all done. Each one should answer, "I'm saved, and I'm being saved every day," because "by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14, NASB).

Although every **believer** is in process, he knows by **faith** that positionally he has already been made perfect and is already being raised up to sit with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). Whatever further conversions of the heart we explore ought never to be taken to imply that our first conversion was invalid or insufficient.

On the other hand, no matter how dramatic or conclusive that conversion was, we run the risk of crippling our abundant life the moment we build a tabernacle as though it once and for all finished the process it, in fact, only began. The **heart** needs to be transformed anew every day, or we fail to grow in Jesus. Indeed, that is our primary definition of growth in Christ—further and further death and rebirth through continuing inner conversion.

Continual **conversion** of a believer's heart moves the heart from **unbelief** to **belief** and repentance. This happens as the light of God's Word reaches into the dark, hidden recesses of the heart, and begins to prepare it to produce good fruit (Matt. 13:3-8).

Historically, in America, sanctification has come to mean striving to live up to the law on the base of a supposedly transformed character. That struggle all too often has led to

judgmentalism because tragically, the transformation had never been complete.

True, we are washed clean at the moment of conversion, and our consciences sprinkled (Heb. 9:14). But not all the character has been transformed at that moment.

Jesus is not yet that firmly seated as Lord in the inner depths of many Christians. It must hurt the Lord deeply that in churches considered most sound, sin so often still runs rampant, even among the leaders. Or where obvious sin has not reared its head, so little fruit of the Spirit is seen.

In such churches, conversion may be complete in the conscious mind, but the heart remains almost untouched.

The Lord must be allowed to fully occupy each believer's heart. This will be accomplished through the weapon of the Word of God being spoken to one another through preaching of the Word, the ministry of small groups, and through diligent, intercessory prayer for and with each other. As the Word touches the places of unbelief in our hearts, we will arise in conversion to take up the battle cry against the flesh and make it our joy to plunge to inner death and rebirth.

Purity of Heart

Matthew 5:8 says, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (KJV). Mark again those words, "pure in heart." Jesus was saying that those whose hearts are purified come to understand and embrace God for who He actually is.

The inference is that because our hearts are not pure, we impute to God motives and ways that are not His. We do not see God, but only our projection of Him.

The Scripture teaches, "We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has

seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:19-21, NASB).

Here we see that the impurity is hate. Our hatred of fellow human beings colors what we see of God—or prevents it altogether.

This is one of the primary facts that necessitates continual conversion of the heart. Our **hidden** and **forgotten judgments**, especially against our fathers and mothers, prevent us from seeing God as He is.

"He who curses his father or his mother, his lamp will go out in time of darkness," wrote Solomon (Prov. 20:20). Our judgments made against our parents in childhood, usually long forgotten, have darkened our spiritual eyes. We do not see ourselves, others, life or God accurately.

Many times people have come to us saying: "Don't talk to me about a loving God. Why doesn't He stop all the wars, or at least prevent some of the bestial things men do to men, sometimes in the very name of religion? Or doesn't He care?" We have all heard statements like that.

Being prayer ministers, Paula and I never try to defend God. We avoid theological debates. We know the answer is not a mental one but a matter of an impure heart. We merely ask, "What was your father like?"

Invariably we uncover a history similar to what the person has imputed to God—cruelty, insensitivity, desertion, criticism and so forth. No matter what the mind may learn in Sunday school of a gentle and loving God who "so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16), the heart has been scarred and shaped by reactions to our earthly fathers.

As a result, we often project cruelty, insensitivity, desertion, criticism and other negative factors onto our

understanding of who God is. Our minds may declare His goodness, but our behaviors reveal what the heart really thinks: "As [a man] thinks in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7, NKJV). Until we are able to forgive our natural fathers for the hurts they may have caused in our hearts, and repent for the judgments we have formed against them, we will not be able to truly see God as gentle, kind and lovingly present in our lives.

Repentance Fosters Healing

I (John) had a gentle, kind father who was a traveling salesman and gone much of the time. During the summer of 1979, I found myself puzzling over why thoughts of unbelief so often trooped through my mind.

In airports or while driving on busy freeways, I would find myself thinking, *How can God really be concerned about every detail of all these people's lives? Or, How can He actually know every hair that falls from every one of these teeming millions of heads?* (See Matthew 10:30.)

My mind insisted, "This is purely a logical matter. After all, that's a reasonable question to ask." But my spirit was not at rest.

Finally I thought to ask the Lord. He instantly replied, "Your father had little time to notice what you were doing." That revealed my inner world of judgments. I had judged, "Dad wouldn't see, compliment, affirm or care."

Nevermind that he did, in fact, do those things when he was home. My bitter root grew because he wasn't always there. So, of course, God wouldn't be there for me. And I worked so hard for Him!

Those thoughts plagued my mind most especially whenever Paula and I were busy serving the Lord. The little boy had been hurt because he worked so hard and received so little notice for

it, and the grown-up subconsciously expected God to treat him like that, too.

Following the revelation, repentance was easy and joyous. I have never since been bothered by such nagging doubts. Now I do not merely have belief, but surety of knowing and feeling that my Father sees and approves of my service to Him. Now I have abiding fellowship with Him, in heart as well as spirit (1 John 1:3).

How many of us have come to our parents for something, and they said, "We'll see," and then forgot about it? Or our parents made a promise to buy us something, but either it never arrived or came so late that the joy of it was gone. Covertly, that colored our faith in God.

What kind of anger did we push down and forget, because we thought, It's not good to be angry with Dad and Mom. What kind of resentful judgments did our hearts cherish and our minds forget?

Seeing God Afresh

Perhaps the most important way we all fail to see God is in the most basic—love. Few of us had parents who could, and did, take the initiative to regularly comfort and give affection when we needed it.

Most of the people I have ministered to insist that their parents did not initiate action appropriate to their needs in childhood. Many complain that their parents never showed affection at all. That clouded our hearts' picture of God, no matter what our minds learned to think of Him.

The entire Bible is the history of God taking the initiative to come to deliver all mankind and us personally. We see that basic fact, if we have eyes at all to read. But in the daily practice of devotional life, we strive to reach a God who we

actually think in our hearts may not be listening after all, and we feel alone.

Our hearts see God clothed in our parents' mannerisms. In such areas we are unconverted in heart. All mankind's history teaches us at our hearts' level that God is created in our image instead of the other way around.

Our own personal history is the fabric by which we see God. And all our judgments become colored glasses that darken the face of God (Is. 55:8-9).

From the moment of our first conversion, the Holy Spirit is given license to work upon our hearts, to reveal and convict. The Christian life of sanctification and transformation is therefore summarized: "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:2-3, NASB).

After many years of ministering to others, Paula and I are still discovering more and more areas in which our own forgotten but still active childhood judgments of our parents have blinded our eyes to God. And we had good, loving, well-intentioned parents.

What of the many who have been so fiercely wounded? St. Paul said, "I press on to know Him" (Phil. 3:12).

Our first conversion has resurrected our inner Lazarus. Now let us be members of that fellowship of Bethany called by Christ to take the grave clothes off one another's hands, feet and faces (John 11:44) so we may behold life, walk with Him and hold His hand.

Read a companion devotional.

John L. and Paula Sandford *are the authors of numerous books,*

including Transforming the Inner Man, from which this article was adapted.