1 Introduction

There is, in fact, no Christian faith, without Christian conversion. For conversion is the process in which we turn from our sin in repentance and turn to God through faith in the finished redemptive work of Christ upon the cross for us. Conversion is central, indispensable, and important to biblical teaching and evangelistic preaching. For that reason, conversion has occupied one of major places in church history. Especially, for a proper understanding of Christianity in America, it is crucial to grasp the meaning of conversion. Also, we cannot properly comprehend the nature or consequence of New England theology, unless we appreciate the centrality of conversion and its changing role in American Christianity.
Conversion, as a religious phenomenon, has appeared in many forms and in diverse religions. But, in this paper, the term “conversion” designates a profound, self-conscious, existential change from one set of Christian beliefs, habits, and orientation to a new structure of belief and action. Conversion is man’s process of transformation; and at some point in the process God regenerates and gives eternal life. Rebirth in Christ, involves change both inward and outward, God’s part and ours, regeneration and conversion, Spirit and water. With the biblical emphasis of conversion in mind, it is necessary to look into the conversion theory of major American Christian leaders.

Thus, in order to capture the shifts of understanding about conversion, we will investigate the thoughts of Jonathan Edwards (1701-1758), and Charles Finney (1792-1875) regarding conversion. These two theologians, living in different contexts, developed their own conversion theory. The influence of these two theologians upon today’s foundations of understanding conversion are immense. First of all, we will trace how conversion was understood based on Puritanism, Revivalism, and in the theology of Edwards. Subsequently, we will examine the view of conversion theory of Finney. Through these studies, we will seek to ascertain the significance of conversion in our current contexts.


2 2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 6:23; Jn. 3:5.

3 In this paper, I follow George M. Marsden’s definition: Regeneration is the act of God in transforming a heart through new birth. Conversion is the individual’s experience of that change, usually a gradual process. Often the two are and were conflated. George M. Marsden, Jonathan