

CONVICTION OR PREFERENCE?

About 10 years ago I was attended a Night to Be with another church group and at this Night to Be we had a lamb that was roasted whole on a spit. As I was watching this lamb being roasted I thought about how the ancient Israelites were to keep the Passover and how the lamb symbolized Jesus Christ. I thought about the instructions of how the lamb was to be roasted whole and not broken in pieces yet at the same time we also know that Christ's body was broken for us.

I started to wonder if there was some sort of contradiction in the symbolism of the Passover. I put my question on the shelf for many years before I started to think about it again. When I did I realized where my misunderstanding was. I failed to draw a distinction between the body and the bones. Just as the lamb's body was completely burned with fire so too was Christ's body subjected to a great fiery trial and was broken and shred to pieces. Just as the lamb's bones were not to be broken when it was being cooked so too did God ensure that Christ's bones weren't broken as we read in John 19:36.

As I thought about it further I wondered why God did insist that none of Christ's bones were to be broken. Is there more to it than just simply to fulfill a prophecy? Now our bones make up our inner framework and picture our inner strength. I suspect the importance of God ensuring His bones weren't broken is that it's a type of Christ's inner strength of character, through God's spirit, not being broken through the ordeal that He went through.

Now, the reason that He didn't compromise was because He was totally convicted that God's way was the right and only way. There was, of course, that dramatic moment of vulnerability in the Garden of Gethsemane when He came close to wavering but in the end He completely trusted that God's way was right and submitted fully to God's way.

Tonight I would like to explore the subject of the difference between a conviction and a preference. According to Oxford's dictionary a conviction is a firm belief, to be fully convinced. A conviction is essentially a belief that we are convicted of all the way through where there is no doubt whatsoever. A preference, on the other hand, is something that we prefer to do.

A conviction is a belief or a standard of behaviour that we will hold to no matter what, while a preference is merely something we prefer to do that we might change under different circumstances.

A good place to start in the Bible to explore the difference between a conviction and a preference is in the parable of the sower that we find in Matthew 13. After explaining how the wicked one snatches away the first seeds, Jesus goes on to say about the second seeds in verses 20 and 21:

"But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately he receives it with joy yet he has no root in himself but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles."

Here is someone who initially accepts God's word for a while but soon after falls away. The circumstances described which bring about this falling away are described as tribulation or hardship and persecution.

Why did he only endure a little while and stumbled when tribulation came along? The answer Jesus gave was that he had no root in himself. He wasn't convicted to the depths of his being that God's way was the right way. When hardship and persecution came along he felt it was better to take the carnal path of least resistance than to stick with God's way. His belief that God's way is the right way was only superficial. It was a preference that changed when circumstances got rough – not a deep down conviction that he was prepared to stick with no matter how rough circumstances got.

Throughout the gospels you will find a distinction between those who believed ON Jesus and those who believed IN Jesus. What is the difference between the two? When it speaks of those who believed IN Jesus the Greek word "en" translated "IN" is also translated as "INTO" in other places. We could think of it this way - ON is "surface" while IN or INTO is "within" or "inside of."

Many can believe on the surface of Jesus; that is, they can believe God exists, believe Jesus once lived on earth, believe that He was a great man with great powers. Their believing ON the facts that a person exists, and can do miracles, is only SURFACE belief. That belief on God does nothing to their inner character and they still go on their own way doing their own things, without any thought of whether God approves of their thoughts, words, and actions. Their surface believing on God, does not effect their life.

God expects much more of us. He wants us to change and to be totally convicted that His way is the right and only way to go. Remember what Jesus said when Satan tempted Him in the wilderness. He said, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by EVERY word of God". What Jesus is telling us here is that God's way is not a smorgasbord. We can't pick and choose what laws of God we want to obey and what ones we don't.

Our spiritual life could be represented by this diagram. The inner core or kernel represents our convictions or core character – the part of our character that will not change no matter what trials get thrown at us. You could call it our real or true character as opposed to our superficial character. The shell represents our preferences – those things we prefer to do but might not stick to when trials come our way. Some points even lie outside of the shell – they aren't even preferences let alone convictions.

There are a lots and lots of different points of morality and doctrine that God could test us on to see whether they are only convictions or preferences in our life. Some of those include such things as how we treat our wife or family at home, whether we believe in tithing, how we react when people do things we don't like, how we talk about people behind their back, being generous with our time and money and so on.

The process of conversion is about changing as many of the preferences as possible to convictions so we'll stick with God's way on such points of morality and doctrine no matter what happens in our life. Academically in our minds we might be totally convinced a point of morality or doctrine is right but God will use circumstances to test whether it is a true conviction of the heart or not.

Now can convictions revert back to being preferences? We appear to have an answer to that question in the parable of the sower. In explaining those of the third category Jesus says: "Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and he becomes unfruitful."

Notice that it says that he “becomes unfruitful”. Initially he was fruitful. We can be convicted of points of morality and hold fast against temptation early in our christian walk but through neglect as we take on too much of the cares of the world we can be weakened spiritually as time goes by.

I’ll give a real life example. One person I know had a really bad temper when he was a teenager and after he came into the church what he did to learn how to control his temper was to play golf. This is true. As all you golfers know golf can be quite an infuriating game and it provides plenty of opportunities to learn how to master your temper. He did it to deliberately learn how to master his temper and he had quite good success. He thought he had the problem conquered but in the years that followed there have been times when he was overwhelmed with personal problems where his temper flared up again and he had to go back and discipline himself to keep his temper in check.

If we struggle with a particular sin we need to find out what we are telling ourselves about the problem. Are we fully convicted that God’s way is right? If not it’s good to find out how we can be more convinced that God’s way is right and convinced that the path of least resistance is not the right way to go.

Mr Armstrong once defined holy and righteous character as the ability in a “separate entity to come to discern the true and right way from the false, to make voluntarily a full and unconditional surrender to God and His perfect way - to yield to be conquered by God -- to determine even against temptation or self-desire, to live and to do the right. And even then such holy character is the gift of God.”

In conclusion, God wants us to live by EVERY word of God not because we prefer to do it but because we are totally convicted it is the right and only way to live.