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*John Gill's*

**A BODY OF DOCTRINAL DIVINITY**

Book 6—Chapter 13

**OF CONVERSION**

Conversion, though it may seem, in some respects, to fall in with regeneration and the effectual calling, yet may be distinguished from them both. Regeneration is the sole act of God; conversion consists both of God's act upon men, in turning them, and of acts done by men under the influence of converting grace; they turn, being turned. Regeneration is the motion of God towards and upon the heart of a sinner; conversion is the motion of a sinner towards God, as one (Charnock) expresses it. In regeneration men are wholly passive, as they also are in the first moment of conversion; but by it become active: it is therefore sometimes expressed passively; "ye are returned", or converted (1 Pet. 2:25), and sometimes actively; "a great number believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21), and "when it", the body of the people of the Jews, "shall turn to the Lord", which has respect to their conversion in the latter day (2 Cor 3:16). The effectual calling is the call of men out of darkness to light; and conversion answers to that call, and is the actual "turning" of men from the one to the other; so that, with propriety, conversion may be considered as distinct from regeneration and the effectual calling. Concerning which may be observed,

1. First, what conversion is, and wherein it lies. The conversion to be treated of is not,

1a. An external one, or what lies only in an outward reformation of life and manners, such as that of the Ninevites; for this may be where internal conversion is not, as in the Scribes and Pharisees; and is what persons may depart from, and return to their former course of life again; and where it is right and genuine, it is the fruit and effect of true conversion, but not that itself.

**1b. Nor is it a mere doctrinal one, or a conversion from false notions before imbibed to a set of doctrines and truths which are according to the Scriptures; so men of old were converted from Judaism and heathenism to Christianity: but not all that were so converted in a doctrinal sense were true and real converts; some had the form of godliness without the power of it, had a name to live, and be called Christians, but were dead, and so not converted; thus the recovery of professors of religion from errors fallen into, to the acknowledgement of the truth, is called a conversion of them (Jas. 5:19, 20).**

**1c. Nor the restoration of the people of God from backslidings to which they are subject, when they are in a very affecting and importunate manner called upon to return to the Lord (Jer. 3:12, 14, 22; Hosea 14:1-4), so Peter, when he fell through temptation, and denied his Lord, and was recovered from it by a look from Christ, it is called his conversion (Luke 22:32). But,**

**1d. The conversion under consideration is a true, real, internal work of God upon the souls of men; there is a counterfeit of it, or there is that in some men who are not really converted, which is somewhat similar to that which is always found in those that are truly converted; as, a sense of sin, and an acknowledgment of it; an apprehension of the divine displeasure at it; great distress about it, a sorrow for it, humiliation on account of it, and an abstinence from it; and something that bears a resemblance to each of these may be found in unconverted persons; though their concern about sin is chiefly for the evil that comes by it, or like to come by it, and not for the evil that is in it; so in converted persons there is sooner or later light into the gospel and the doctrines of it: particularly the doctrine of salvation by Christ, which yield relief and comfort to them under a sense of sin, and encourage faith and hope in God; and there is something like this to be observed in some who are not truly converted, who are said to be "enlightened", that is, in a notional and doctrinal way; and to "taste" the good word of God, though it is only in a superficial manner; and to "receive it with joy", with a flash of natural affection, which lasts for a while; and to believe it with a temporary faith, historically, and become subject to the ordinances; but yet in all this there is no heart work, whereas true genuine conversion lies,**

**1d1. In the turn of the heart to God, of the thoughts of the heart; which are only evil, and that continually, and about evil things, not about God, and the things of God; "God is not in all their thoughts", nor in any of the thoughts of wicked men; but when converted, their thoughts are about their state and condition by nature, about their souls, and the eternal welfare of them; and about God, and the methods of his grace in the salvation of men: it is a turn of the "desires" of the heart, which before were after vain, carnal, worldly, sinful lusts and pleasures; but now after God and communion with him, after Christ and salvation by him, after the Spirit and the things of the Spirit: it is a turn of the "affections" of the heart, which before were "inordinate", and ran in a wrong channel; before they were fleshly, after the things of the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life: but now they are checked, and turned towards God, their hearts being circumcised to**

love him; and whom they love with their whole hearts and souls, because he first loved them; though before their carnal minds were enmity to him; and towards Christ, whom they now love affectionately, fervently, superlatively, and sincerely; and towards the saints, who are now the excellent in the earth, in whose conversation is all their delight, though before hateful to them; and towards the word, worship, and ordinances of God, which they take pleasure in attending on, though before a weariness to them. Conversion is a turn of the "mind" from carnal things to spiritual ones, and from earthly things to heavenly ones; yea it is a turn of the "will", which before conversion is in a very bad state, is stubborn and inflexible, biased to and bent upon that which is evil, and averse to all that is good; but in conversion God "works in" men "both to will and to do of his good pleasure"; he gives them another will, or however a turn to their will, so that of an unwilling people, they are made a willing people in the day of his power on them; whereas they were unwilling to come to Christ for salvation, and take him alone to be their Saviour; "ye will not come unto me that ye might have life", says Christ (John 5:40), that is, ye have no will to come to me at all for life and salvation; they chose rather to go anywhere than to him for it; but now they are willing to be saved by him, and resolve to have no other Saviour but him; yea though he slay them they will trust in him, and say he shall be our salvation; and though before they went about to establish their own righteousness, and did not and would not submit to the righteousness of Christ; now their stout hearts, which were far from righteousness, are brought down, and they become willing to be found in Christ, and in his righteousness only; and inasmuch as before they would not have Christ to reign over them, and chose not to be subject to his laws and ordinances, now they are ready to acknowledge him as their king and governor, and turn their feet to his testimonies, and esteem his precepts concerning all things to be right.

1d2. Conversion lies in a man's being turned from darkness to light; the apostle says, he was sent by Christ to the Gentiles, as a minister of the gospel, "to turn them from darkness to light" (Acts 26:18), that is, to be the instrument or means of their conversion, by preaching the gospel to them. In this conversion may seem to coincide with the effectual calling; but it may be observed, that the effectual calling is a call to, but conversion is a turning of, men from darkness to light; God not only calls unto light, but turns them to light in every sense; to God who is light itself, and in whom is no darkness at all; to Christ, who is the light of the world; to the gospel, which is the great light that shines on men who sit in darkness; and to the light of grace, which is a shining light, that shines more and more unto the perfect day.

1d3. Conversion lies in the turning of men "from the power of Satan unto God", as in the above place (Acts 26:18). Satan has great power over men in an unconverted state, his seat is in their hearts, which are the palace in which he rules; he works effectually with great power and energy in the children of disobedience, by stirring up their lusts and corruptions, suggesting evil things to their minds, and tempting them to them; he does all he can to keep them in their native blindness and ignorance, and to increase it, and to prevent them from hearing the gospel, and from its being beneficial to them, lest the light of it should shine into their minds; he

**captivates them, and leads them captive at his will; and they are willingly led by him, the lusts of their father they will do; but now in conversion they are turned from his power; he is dispossessed of them, and his armor taken from him in which he trusted; the prey is taken out of the hands of the mighty, and the lawful captive is delivered; men are translated from the power of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son; and though they are not freed from his temptations, yet they have grace sufficient given them to bear up under them till it is the pleasure of God to save them from them, who will shortly bruise him under them; and as they are in conversion turned from him, they are turned to God; who before were without him, and alienated from the life of him, and strangers to him; but now they are turned to the knowledge of him, to love to him, to faith in him, and to communion with him.**

**1d4. Conversion lies in turning men from idols to serve the living God; not merely from idols of silver and gold, of wood and stone, as formerly, but from the idols of a man's own heart, his lusts and corruptions; with respect to which the language of a converted sinner is, "What have I to do any more with idols?" this is a blessing bestowed in conversion, "Unto you first, God having raised up his son Jesus, sent him to bless you", in "turning away everyone of you from his iniquities". In redemption Christ turns away iniquities from his people by bearing them and making satisfaction for them; and in conversion, he by his Spirit and grace turns them from their iniquities; he turns them from the love of them to an hatred of them, even of vain thoughts, as well as of sinful actions; from the service and drudgery of them to the service of righteousness; from the power and dominion of them and subjection to them, and from a course of living in them to a life of holiness; and from the paths of sin to the paths of truth and uprightness.**

**1d5. Conversion lies in turning men from their own righteousness to the righteousness of Christ; not from doing works of righteousness, for such converted persons are most fit for, and most capable of, and are under the greatest obligations to perform; but from depending upon them for justification before God and acceptance with him; in order to which they must be convinced by the Spirit of God of the insufficiency of their own righteousness to justify them, being imperfect; and of the necessity, perfection, and fulness of Christ's righteousness, which being turned unto, they receive, embrace, lay hold on, and plead as their justifying righteousness before God; and this requires more than human teachings: for though ministers are said to "turn many to righteousness", that is, to the righteousness of Christ, yet only instrumentally, and as the means of it, through preaching the gospel, in which there is a revelation of it; for God is the efficient cause of the turn of them to it; for though the gospel is the ministration of it, yet it is the Lord that must bring it near to stouthearted ones far from righteousness, and make them willing to submit unto it, and to be desirous of being found in it; for men naturally do not care to part with their own righteousness; it is their own, and what they have been a long time and with great labour rearing up, and to have it demolished, they cannot bear it; they would fain hold it fast, and lean upon it, though it shall not stand; it is their idol, in which they place their trust and confidence, and to take this away from them is to take away their god; as Micah said, when his idol was stolen**

from him, "Ye have taken away my gods, and what have I more?" Wherefore the conversion of a self-righteous person is more rare and difficult than the conversion of a profligate sinner; hence our Lord says to the Scribes and Pharisees, that "the publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before them"; and that he himself "came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 21:31; 9:13).

1d6. Conversion lies in a man's turning to the Lord actively, under the influence of divine grace; and by this phrase it is often expressed in scripture, as in Isaiah 10:21; Acts 11:21; 2 Corinthians 3:16, men being thoroughly convinced that there is salvation in no other but in Christ, that it is in vain to expect it elsewhere; after they have made many inquiries and searches to no purpose, turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, and look to him alone for salvation; being apprized of their danger, they turn as they are directed, encouraged and enabled to Christ the stronghold, where they are safe from all danger, and from every enemy; being made sensible of the insufficiency of their own righteousness and of the suitableness of the righteousness of Christ for them, they turn to him as the Lord their righteousness, in whom all the seed of Israel are justified and shall glory; and being fully satisfied with the equity of the laws, rules, and ordinances of Christ, they turn to him as their Lord and Lawgiver, and submit to his commands, renouncing all other lords and their dominion over them; and though in their natural state they are like sheep going astray, in conversion they are returned to Christ, as the great Shepherd and bishop of souls: the parable of seeking and finding, and bringing home the lost sheep, is a fit representation of the conversion of a sinner: Christ's people are his sheep before conversion, but they are lost sheep, straying in the wilderness; and as sheep never return to the fold, shepherd and pasture of themselves, unless looked up and are returned; so neither do they, till they are sought for and found, and brought home by Christ, the proprietor of them, with joy; and the parables following represent the same thing; as that of the lost piece of silver, for finding which the woman lights a candle and sweeps the house, and searches every corner till she finds it, which gives her joy; this sets forth the high esteem and value the elect are in with Christ, comparable to silver, yea to line gold and precious stones; and the passiveness of men in first conversion, who no more contribute to it than the piece of silver to its being found; and the means and methods made use of in conversion, the light of the gospel ministry, and the stir and bustle on that occasion: so the parable of the prodigal son, and his return to his father, is expressive of the same; his manner of living before his return is a lively picture of the state of unconverted men, living in their lusts, and pursuing the desires of the flesh and of the mind; in his return there are all the symptoms of a true and real conversion; as a sense of his starving, famishing, and perishing state by nature; his coming to his right mind, his sense of sin, confession of it, and repentance for it; his faith and hope of meeting with a favorable reception by his father, which encouraged him to return, and which he met with; (see Isa. 55:7).

2. Secondly, The causes of conversion, efficient, moving, and instrumental.

2a. First, The efficient cause, which is not man but God.

**2a1. Not man, it is neither by the power nor will of man.**

**2a1a. Not by the power of man; what is said of the conversion or turning of the Jews from their captivity, is true of the conversion of a sinner, that it is "not by might nor by power", that is not of man, "but by my Spirit, as saith the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6). Men are dead in a moral sense while unconverted, they are dead in trespasses and sins, which are the cause of their death; and their very living in them is no other than a moral death; nor can they quicken themselves, and unless they are quickened they cannot be converted; and being in a moral sense dead they are "strengthless"; they are not only "weak through the flesh", the corruption of nature, but they are "without strength"; without any strength at all to perform that which is good, and much less a work of so great importance as their own conversion; they have not the command of themselves, nor any power over their hearts, the thoughts, desires, and affections of them; they cannot check them and control them at pleasure; they cannot think anything as of themselves, much less think a good thought; they cannot turn the streams of their desires and affections to proper objects; they cannot move their minds, nor bend their wills, even to that which is to their own advantage. Conversion is such an alteration in a man as is not in his power to effect: it is like that of an Ethiopian changing his skin, and a leopard his spots; such things are never heard of, as a blackamoor becoming white, and a leopard becoming clear of his spots; and as unlikely is it that a man should convert himself (Jer. 13:23), a tree must first be made good, so as to bring forth good fruit; "Make the tree good", says our Lord; but the tree cannot make itself good; another hand must be employed about it, to engraft it, cultivate and improve it: a thorn bush cannot turn itself into a vine tree, and so bring forth grapes; nor a thistle into a fig tree, to bring forth figs; but as soon may these things be done as a man to convert himself and bring forth the good fruits of righteousness (Matthew 12:33; 7:16-18). Conversion is the motion of the soul towards God; but as this cannot be in a dead man, and unless he is quickened, so not unless he is drawn by efficacious grace; wherefore God, in conversion, draws men with lovingkindness to himself; and, with the cords of love, to his Son; for "no man", says Christ, "can come unto me, except the Father, which hath sent me, draw him" (John 6:44), and even converted persons themselves are so sensible of this, that they pray, as the church did, "Draw me, we will run after thee" (Song of Sol. 1:4), the thing speaks for itself, and shows that it cannot be done by the power of man; for it is no other than a "creation", which requires creation power to effect it, which a creature has not; for if the restoration, or conversion, of a backslidden saint is a creation, and requires the power of the Creator to do it; of which David, when backslidden, was sensible, and therefore prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God!" then much more is the first conversion of a sinner, and requires like power; it is a resurrection from the dead, and is not to be effected but by the exceeding greatness of God's power, even such as was put forth in raising Christ from the dead (Eph. 1:19).**

**2a1b. Nor is conversion owing to the will of men; the will of man, before conversion, is in a bad state, it chooses its own ways, and delights in its abominations; it is in high pursuit after the desires of the flesh and of the mind; it is resolved to go after**

its lovers, its lusts, which feed its appetite, and furnish with things agreeable to the carnal mind; the will is become a slave to carnal lusts and pleasures; though the natural liberty of the will is not lost by sin, it can freely will natural things, as to eat or drink, sit, or stand, or walk, at pleasure; yet its moral liberty is lost, it is shackled with the fetters of sinful lusts, by which it is overcome and brought into bondage; and notwithstanding its boasted liberty, it is an home born slave; and therefore Luther rightly called it "servum arbitrium": man has no will to that which is good till God works it in him, and of unwilling makes him willing in the day of his power: he has no will to come to Christ, to be saved by him; nor to submit to his righteousness; nor to be subject to his laws and ordinances, until such a will is worked in him by efficacious grace. Conversion is denied to be of the will of men; as the whole of salvation is "not of him that willeth"; so this part of it in particular, regeneration, with which conversion, in the first moment of it, agrees; "is not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Rom. 9:16; John 1:13).

But it may be said, if conversion is not in the power and will of men, to what purpose are such exhortations as these; "Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; turn yourselves, and live ye?" and again, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted?" Ezekiel 18:30, 32 and Acts 3:19 to which it may be replied, That these passages have no respect to spiritual and internal conversion, but to an external reformation of life and manners. In the first instance the Jews were then in a state of captivity, which was a kind of death, as sometimes sore afflictions are said to be (2 Cor. 1:10), and into which they were brought through their sins: now the Lord declares, that he took no pleasure in this their uncomfortable state and condition; it was more desirable to him, and therefore he exhorts them to it, to reform from their evil practices; then they would be returned from their captivity, and live comfortably in their own land, as they had formerly done. But what has this to do with the spiritual and internal conversion of a sinner unto

God? with respect to the latter case, the Jews were threatened with the destruction of their city and nation, for their rejection of Jesus the Messiah, and other sins they were guilty of; and now the apostle advises those to whom he directs his discourse, to relinquish their wrong notions of Christ, and repent of their ill usage of him and his followers, and of their other sins, in an external way, that so they might escape the calamities coming upon their nation and people. But supposing these, and such like exhortations, respected internal conversion of the heart to God; such exhortations may be only designed to show men the necessity of such conversion in order to salvation; as our Lord said, "Except ye be converted, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven"; and when men are convinced of this, they will soon be sensible of their impotence to convert themselves, and will pray, as Ephraim did "Turn thou me, and I shall be turned", immediately and effectually; for,

2a2. God only is the author and efficient cause of conversion. He that made man's heart, and formed the spirit of man within him, he only can turn their hearts, and frame and mould their spirits, as he pleases; the heart of a king, and so of every other man, is in the hand of the Lord, and he can turn them as the rivers of water

are turned; he, and he only, can give a check unto, and turn the thoughts, desires, and affections of the heart into another channel, and the mind and will to other objects; he can remove the stubbornness of the will, and bend it at his pleasure, and make it pliable and conformable to his own will; he can take away the hardness of the heart, though it is like an adamant stone, he can make it soft, and susceptible of the best impressions; he can break the rocky heart in pieces; yea, take away the stony heart, and give an heart of flesh; as he can take what he pleases out of it, so he can put into it what he will, as he does in conversion, his laws, the fear of him, and his Spirit; he can and does draw them, by the powerful influence of his grace upon them, to himself and to his Son; and this he does without forcing their wills; he sweetly allures, by his grace, to come to Christ and his ordinances; he powerfully persuades Japheth to dwell in the tents of Shem; he makes his people willing, in the day of his power, to do what they had before no will nor inclination to; and yet they act most freely; the manslayer did not more willingly flee to a city of refuge, to shelter him from the avenger of blood, than a sinner, sensible of his danger, flees to Christ for refuge, and lays hold on the hope set before him.

The power of divine grace, put forth in conversion, is irresistible; that is, so irresistible, as that a stop cannot be put to the work, and that become of no effect, through opposition made unto it from within and from without. Conversion is according to the will of God, his will of purpose, which can never be frustrated; "Who hath resisted his will?" his counsel shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure; it is wrought by his almighty power; the work of faith, which is a principal part of the work of conversion, is begun, carried on, and performed with power; nor can a sinner any more resist, so as to make of none effect, the power of God in conversion, than Lazarus could resist the power of Christ in calling him out of his grave. If it was in the power of the will of men to hinder the work of conversion, so as that it should not take place, when it is the design of God it should; then God might be disappointed of his end, which must not be said; for there is no counsel nor might against him; whatever devices may be in a man's heart, the counsels of God can never be disappointed; when God has purposed to convert a sinner, who can disannul it? and when his mighty hand of grace is stretched out, to put that purpose into execution, who can turn it back? when he works in any way, and so in this, there is none can let. Besides, if conversion was to stand or fall according to the will of men; or if that had the turning point in man's conversion, it would rather be ascribed to the will of men than to the will of God; and it would not be true what is said, "It is not of him that willeth": yea, as the will of men then would have the greatest stroke in conversion, in answer to that question, "Who maketh thee to differ from another?" it might be said, as it has been said by a proud and haughty free willer Grevinchovius, I have made myself to differ.

To all this may be objected the words of Christ; "How often would I have gathered thy children together, and ye would not!" (Matthew 23:37) but it should be observed, that this gathering is not to be understood of conversion; but of attendance on the ministry of the word under John the Baptist, Christ himself, and his apostles; to which Christ had affectionately and importunately exhorted them; which, had it

been regarded, would have preserved them from the vengeance coming upon Jerusalem: and it should also be observed, that they are not the same persons whom Christ would have gathered, and those of whom he says, "and ye would not"; by whom are meant, the rulers and governors of the people, who would not allow them to attend the gospel ministry, but threatened them with putting them out of the synagogue if they did; (see Matthew 23:13).

2b. Secondly, The moving, or impulsive cause of conversion, is the love, grace, mercy, favour, and goodwill of God; the same as are the moving cause of regeneration and effectual calling, and not the merits of men; for what is there in men before conversion to move God to take such a step in their favour? (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 2:2-4).

2c. Thirdly, The instrumental cause, or means of conversion, is usually the ministry of the word; sometimes, indeed, it is wrought without the word, by some remarkable awakening providence or another, and sometimes by reading the scriptures; but, for the most part, it is through the preaching of the word; hence ministers are said to "turn many to righteousness"; and the apostle Paul says, he was sent by Christ into the Gentile world, to "turn men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God"; and this is done both by the preaching of the law and of the gospel; "the law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul" (Ps. 19:7), though perhaps not the law, strictly taken, but the whole doctrine of the word is there meant; however, the preaching of the law is made use of by the Spirit of God to convince of sin; for "by the law is the knowledge of sin"; and by means of it, when it enters into the heart and conscience, under his influence, sin is made to appear exceeding sinful, and the soul is filled with great distress on account of it; for the "law worketh wrath"; though some take this to be rather preparatory to conversion than conversion itself, which may be better ascribed to the gospel; and, indeed, the receiving of the Spirit, and his graces, and particularly faith, are attributed to the preaching of the gospel, and not to the law, as the means thereof; "Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law?" that is, by preaching the doctrine of obedience to it; "or by the hearing of faith?" that is, by the doctrine of the gospel, preaching faith in Christ; which is therefore called "the word of faith", and by which it comes; for "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Gal. 3:2; Rom. 10:8, 17), but then the preaching of the word of the gospel is not sufficient of itself to produce the work of conversion in the heart; men may hear it, and not be converted by it; nor receive any benefit, profit, and advantage through it; if it comes in word only, and not with the demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; and when it is accompanied with the power of God; or is made the power of God unto salvation, even then it is only an instrument, and not an efficient; for "who is Paul, or who is Apollos, but ministers, or instruments, by whom ye believed?" (1 Cor. 3:5).

3. Thirdly, The subjects of conversion; these are not all men, for all, in fact, are not converted; nor does it appear to be the design and purpose of God to convert all men; nor does he give sufficient grace to all men to convert themselves if they will; for he does not so much as give to all men the means of grace, the outward ministry

**of the word: this was not vouchsafed to the Gentiles for hundreds of years before the coming of Christ; and since, millions have never been favored with it; nor are multitudes at this day; and those who have the scripture to read, to many it is a sealed book, and to all, unless opened by the Spirit of God; and to whom the gospel is preached, it is hid, unless it is given them to know the mysteries of the kingdom, which is not the case of all; the persons converted are the "elect" of God, both among Jews and Gentiles: in the first ages of the gospel, many among the Gentiles were converted, and churches formed of them; and ever since there have been conversions among them, and even to this day, and in the latter day an abundance of them will be converted; and when the fulness of the Gentiles is brought in, then the Jews, of whom only now and then one are converted, they will be all as a nation born again, converted and saved. They are "redeemed" ones who are converted; and the reason why they are converted is, because they are redeemed; "I will hiss for them", by the ministry of the word, and "gather them", which is another phrase for conversion, "because I have redeemed them" (Zech. 10:8), they whom God converts are the same persons for whom he has provided forgiveness of sins in the covenant of his grace, and an eternal inheritance in his divine purpose; for the apostle says, he was sent by Christ "to turn men unto God, that they may receive the forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith in Christ" (Acts 26:18). In a word, they are described as "sinners"; "Sinners shall be converted unto thee" (Ps. 51:13), sinners by nature and by practice, and some of them the worst and chief of sinners; and therefore the wonderful grace of God is the more displayed in their conversion, (1 Cor. 6:11; 1 Tim. 1:3, 14, 15).**