

The First-Fruits unto Christ

“Salute my well-beloved Epenetus, who is the first-fruits of Achaia unto Christ.” — Romans 16:5

Summary:

Epenetus was the first convert in Achaia and was dearly loved by Paul, though he belonged to Christ, whose grace had saved him. The conversion of a single soul surpasses the fleeting accomplishments of earthly kingdoms. Early converts may come to faith through different divine providences and often face challenging roles of trial and service. They also earn the privilege of openly standing for Christ, serving as examples, and becoming means through which others are attracted to him.

Outline:

1. Fruit belonging to Christ

Ministers are instruments, but conversion is the Saviour’s work and reward.

2. The importance of one conversion

A soul brought into Christ’s kingdom has greater lasting value than earthly achievements.

3. The providence behind first converts

God uses varied and apparently ordinary events to bring individuals to saving faith.

4. A position of trial and duty

Those who stand first must endure opposition and display exemplary Christian conduct.

5. A position of honour and influence

Their courageous example may lead families, neighbours, and former opponents to Christ.

Text

Paul recalls many individuals with affection and specifically greets Epenetus as his beloved. We don't all love others equally or in the same way. The Apostle refers to this convert as 'fruits unto Christ'—not to himself—since he was instrumental in leading him to Christ, but he acknowledges he didn't save, justify, or call him by grace. His role was simply as a tool, with the Lord confirming the message through signs. In another verse, Paul states, "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom ye believed, as the Lord gave to every man?"

Converted sinners are the joy and reward of ministers, especially of the Saviour, who sees in them his work, his image, the outcome of his suffering, and the fulfilment of his labour. As the originator of their salvation, He will delight in their joy and receive their praise forever. Epenetus is identified as the "first-fruits unto Christ in Achaia," highlighting his early and significant role.

Paul mentions to the Corinthians that "Ye know the house of Stephanas, that it is the first-fruits of Achaia." The seeming difficulty here is clarified by understanding that the house of Stephanas was the first family to convert, with Epenetus being the first individual in that family to do so. Initially, Christians were few and united under persecution, making them highly recognizable to each other and their pastors. They were distinctive figures, and converting someone to Christianity in a pagan environment would have been especially noticeable.

It was the creation of "a new creature," which naturally attracted a lot of curiosity. It revealed the "heavenly," contrasting with what was previously "earthly, and sensual, and devilish." Clearly, it was something deserving of notice. Earthly minds are typically most interested in worldly affairs—such as the actions of politicians, the deeds of heroes, and the discoveries of scholars. However, what Paul observed in Achaia was the first person called out of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son.

He understood that saving even one soul was far more significant than freeing an entire kingdom from civil unrest. Kingdoms may vanish, but a single soul can serve as a lasting testament to grace and glory. "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." We do not know how long Epenetus remained the only Christian in his family and community, but such circumstances are quite common.

We often observe individual converts seeking and serving Christ as the first-fruits of their community or household. The ways and means by which these individuals are introduced and uplifted vary greatly and are often quite remarkable. It might happen through hearing the Gospel away from home, visiting a family engaged in worship, encountering a good book, receiving a letter from a friend, conversing with a stranger, or experiencing an affliction that deeply affects the heart and reveals life's true prospects—there are countless such instances.

Although the events that led to this significant occasion appeared quite ordinary, they were all orchestrated by his own intentions and grace. The initial converts find themselves in a challenging situation, essentially a test. Sometimes the trial is intense, requiring them to carry their cross daily—and even hourly—often a burden too heavy to bear without divine help. Many who have been raised religiously underestimate what some individuals must go through, especially at the start of their spiritual journey. Instead of receiving support and encouragement, they often face neglect, opposition, ridicule, and reproach from those around them—including those they hold dear.

They are also in a position of responsibility. They must be not only harmless and blameless but also exemplary in their speech, temper, and behaviour. This is because they will attract close scrutiny, with their actions examined by those with enmity who will magnify any faults. They will be judged by their profession, and their religion will be judged by their conduct. Their goal is to silence critics and win them over through good works that glorify God on the day of visitation. They should adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all aspects; walking in wisdom to draw in those outside the faith. They must avoid rudeness or disdain, never giving the impression, “Stand by thyself; come not near to me! I am holier than thou.” They should not appear stiff or affected in small lawful matters, as this might lead others to think their religion consists of oddities or perverseness.

However, in matters of undeniable obligation and genuine importance, they must remain steadfast and unwavering, consistently dedicated to the work of the Lord. Conscience demands this commitment, as it aligns with the testimony they are to give for God; furthermore, only through such consistency can they earn the respect and trust of others. They occupy a position of honour and have a unique opportunity to demonstrate their principles.

Later converts might also be quite sincere, but those who come after, with the backing and support of others, can’t as clearly appear to be on the Lord’s side or demonstrate the purity and strength of their motives as clearly as those who step forward alone and declare to everyone, regardless of their number, influence, or affection, “Choose this day whom you will serve—but as for me, I will serve the Lord.” Such individuals have the opportunity to lead by example rather than follow, and they are likely to influence others to follow their example.

We have rarely seen instances of failure. The effects may not always be immediately visible, but when individuals are empowered to walk in a way worthy of God and pleasing to all, they eventually do not go alone to the Cross of Christ, to the Throne of Grace, or to the House of God. Instead, they are accompanied—sometimes by those who once stayed away or even opposed them. As it is written, “he that converteth a sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.”

This sermon is taken from William Jay’s devotional, *Morning and Evening Exercises* (January 7, Morning), first published in 1854.