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Church Matters: Conversion: Living in Light of the Doctrine

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Biblical Thinking For

Building Healthy Churches

Why the Doctrine of Conversion Is “Problematic”

by Taylor Hartley

You shouldn't be a pastor if you don't hold to a biblical doctrine of conversion. After all, being a pastor requires knowing what a Christian is *and* how a non-Christian can become a Christian. Moreover, a significant part of the pastor's task is to preach God's Word to God's people, which assumes that those whom you're preaching to are *real* Christians. If they aren't and yet you've convinced them that they are via your faulty understanding of conversion, then you and they will answer to Jesus for your errors, and that will be a dreadful thing.

I'm probably not saying anything new here, but if I am, press pause and go read Michael Lawrence's excellent book called . . . wait for it . . . *Conversion*.¹ You won't regret it.

Okay, back to our regularly scheduled programming. My guess is you probably know that conversion is important. And yet, though we may not always be able to articulate why, the doctrine can be problematic. Now, before you “Cry ‘Havoc,’ and let slip the dogs. . .” I don't mean

that the doctrine *itself* is problematic. It's not. At all.

The Bible speaks clearly about what a man must do to be converted. In fact, that's the very question Peter's audience asked him at Pentecost after he accused them of crucifying Jesus. They cried out, "Brothers, what shall we do?" and Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized . . . for the forgiveness of your sins . . ." (Acts 2:37–38). Likewise, when the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved . . ." (Acts 16:31). Seems pretty clear.

So what do I mean by calling the doctrine of conversion *problematic*?

I mean that it *exposes* various kinds of "problems" by pointing out the universal problem of sin and its consequences. Let me identify three of these problems to make it clear why a biblical doctrine of conversion is so important, particularly for pastors.

1. The Theological Problem

How is a person saved? Simple: repent and believe. And yet, Scripture teaches that no one can obey these simple imperatives by his own power. Here's how Paul puts it in Romans 8:7–9:

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

"You shouldn't be a pastor if you don't hold to a biblical doctrine of conversion."

Man's natural hostility toward God makes him unable to submit to God's law, which makes pleasing God an impossibility.² And lest anyone think he can avoid this problem by choosing amity toward God rather than hostility, Paul attributes man's hostility to the fact that he is in Adam (Rom. 5:12), estranged from God and spiritually dead. The only remedy, then, is for God's Spirit to grant new life. That is, God must move toward man because man can't move toward God.

And here lies the heart of the theological problem: God must supply what he requires.³ God's Spirit must regenerate a man if he is to repent and believe.⁴ This is exactly what Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3. After presenting something of a Gordian knot to the flummoxed Pharisee, Jesus offered the only blade by which it can be cut. Man can only be born again if he is born "of water and the Spirit . . ." (John 3:5). No Spirit, no conversion. I appreciate how Jonathan Edwards explains the Spirit's relationship to conversion, describing the latter as nothing less than "confering the Spirit of God, which dwells in the soul and becomes there a principle of life and action."⁵ It is precisely because the Spirit has become the soul's "principle of life" or inward spring of activity through regeneration that man cannot help but move toward God in repentance and faith and so be saved.⁶

So, the Spirit must give life for man to repent and believe. That doesn't hollow out man's responsibility to respond. My church uses the New Hampshire Confession as our statement of faith. I love how Article VIII captures this relationship between conversion and the Spirit's work, as it refers to repentance and faith as "sacred duties, and inseparable graces . . ."⁷ God truly requires that everyone repent and believe, making these acts "duties" to be obeyed. Man must really do them! Yet these are also graces, for God must confer the Spirit on man if he is to perform these duties. Even the faith to believe is itself of grace (Eph. 2:8–9).

Of course, referring to repentance and faith as duties *and* graces signposts a Reformed framing of this great salvation. I think such a framing is biblically required, but it wasn't always so for me. When I was eighteen, I said to my accountability partner, DJ, who was trying to convince me of Calvinism at the time, that if God must give what he requires and only chooses to give to some, then I didn't want to worship him anymore. It's embarrassing to admit that, but that's what I said. I thought a law could only be legitimate if the one under it possessed an *independent* ability to obey it.

Preaching what the Bible says about these "sacred duties" and "inseparable graces" will likely confuse or offend people. Like my eighteen-year-old self, proud and zealous (and maybe even zealous for the truth), they will blow up your email on Monday morning after you've preached doctrines such as the total depravity of man or God's effectual grace. More often, though, your

people will sincerely want to understand what the Bible says about these things, and they'll ask questions like: *How can God demand something of someone who is unable to obey? Why doesn't God choose to regenerate everyone? If God is sovereign over conversion, then isn't he responsible for the sins of unbelievers?*

“God’s Spirit
must regenerate a
man if he is to repent
and believe.”

It's your job, pastor, lay or staff alike, to faithfully help your people understand these matters from Scripture. From the pulpit to the coffee shop, you must offer them a biblical understanding of God's sovereignty, our dependence on his grace, and the moral obligation we have to respond to the gospel in repentance and faith. Hopefully this issue of *Church Matters* equips you to do just that.

2. The Personal Problem

I remember doing contact evangelism with my grandfather when I was about ten years old. I'm talking about old-school contact evangelism where you walk up to somebody's home uninvited and do the unthinkable: knock on their door. After watching my Papaw do it a dozen times or so on that particular evening, I asked if I could give it a try. He agreed. My heart was racing. *What if they reject me? What if they get mad?*

Those three steps up onto the porch might as well have been the final push on a summit day on Mount Everest. Finally reaching the door, I knocked quietly hoping no one would be home. A dog barked. A lady came to the door. I sheepishly introduced myself and held out a gospel tract. Before I had a chance to tell her why I was there, all manner of cursing and yelling broke out and she grabbed a broom and chased me off the porch. She told me I better never knock on her door again—unfortunate for many reasons, least of which was the fact that her house was on my paper route to deliver the *Bargain Hunter* to her every Monday!

That lady taught me something that is true of every unregenerate person: the gospel offends them, and it offends because it always indicts. The gospel never assumes innocence until proof of guilt is established. Instead, it begins with the universal verdict of guilt on the basis that all have sinned against a most holy God and are justly sentenced to receive eternal judgment in hell as a result (Rom. 3:23). That's a tough message to sell when the market is filled with self-loving, God-hating people, which is all of us apart from Christ. And yet, you can't effectively evangelize if you're not willing to tell people the truth. You have to eventually say something like: "God's judgment is on you. You are going to hell if you do not repent and believe on the Lord Jesus."

Hopefully you can see why I'm referring to the biblical doctrine of conversion as *problematic* for you and for the unbelievers around you. For you, the problem likely lies in the fear you feel, and for them in the truth it tells.

I pray that articles like Sam Ro-mine's on preaching for conversion or David Burnette's on assessing conversion in membership interviews embolden you to tell folks the truth about their sin and their need for a Savior. I also pray that your people learn from your preaching and example to speak the gospel boldly to anyone who will listen regardless of how it may offend.

3. The Cultural Problem

Many, I trust, have read and benefited from the cultural analysis of Charles Taylor in works like *A Secular Age*. Writing in 2007, Taylor identified three movements of secularization at play in society. Secularity 1 involves the emptying out of Christianity and Christian presuppositions from our public institutions. Secularity 2 names the general decline in religious belief and practice—think of fewer people attending church, praying, or accepting moral norms rooted in the Bible. Secularity 3 identifies the common assumption that there are many legitimate views of reality, making religious exclusivity seem preposterous. Even for the religiously minded, Taylor identifies the temptation to constantly be "looking over our shoulder" at the "intelligent, reasonably undeluded" viewpoints of others.⁸

Now apply Taylor's insights to biblical conversion. You see the "problem." The West is increasingly pluralistic, reframing the very concept of truth around what works for any given individual. Meanwhile, biblical Christianity remains as stalwart as ever that everyone everywhere must repent and

believe in the Lord Jesus or face judgment. These two approaches are like complete strangers. They don't come from the same place, nor do they speak the same language.

It's the tension you feel when you're evangelizing a neighbor or confronting a protester at the front door of your church. You see, the gospel's indictment does not just strike at a personal level but a societal one as well. When you insist on repentance, you're calling someone to abandon things like the unrestrained pursuit of happiness and material gain, freedom of sexual expression, and an individual's right to determine and act on "their truth." These are the very things secularism has taught people to treasure most.

It's kind of like evangelizing a devout Muslim who comes from an all-Muslim family. When you call that person to repent and believe in Jesus, you're calling them to do something that will potentially sever the relationships they hold most dear. That's because repentance doesn't just say, "I was wrong," but also "you, mom and dad, are wrong," or, in the case of secularism, "the rest of the world is wrong." Calling any member of the mass to reject those doctrines says to the whole that their doctrines are wrong—even damning. You see then how easy it is to stir up a mob by trying to win its individual members.

Of course, God's Word has plenty to say about facing opposition,⁹ and opposition was certainly no surprise to Jesus. In fact, he told us to *expect* the world's hatred because (1) the world hates him and (2) he chose us as his own.¹⁰ Jesus also promises that each

of us will be equipped with the Holy Spirit, whom he refers to as a Helper. Not only will this Helper bear witness about Christ to the world—thus saving some—but he will also help us bear witness (John 15:26–27).

Our message about Christ and the need for all people everywhere to repent and believe will continue to cut against secularism's grain, but we can and must go on speaking, for we know that Christ is with us (Matt. 28:20). Moreover, we know that God has exalted Christ "as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31). I pray that this issue of *Church Matters* strengthens you, pastor, to preach the gospel boldly, even in the face of opposition. And as a result, I pray your people will also grow bold for Christ's sake. Lastly, I pray that the Lord would convert people under your church's ministry for his glory and your eternal joy.

1. Michael Lawrence, *Conversion: How God Creates a People* (Crossway, 2017).

2. The first man, Adam, started from a different position than we who are "in him." Before eating of the forbidden fruit, Adam stood in a position of *posse peccare, posse non peccare*—able to sin or not sin. For him, then, it was his disobedience to God's law which produced God's displeasure leading to estrangement from God and the corruption of his nature.

3. For more on Augustine's insight into this matter, see Keith Goad's article titled "Augustine on Conversion" in this issue of *Church Matters*.

4. I do not mean to hold these two things so separate as to imply that a man may be

regenerated and yet fail for some time or finally to be converted. Rather, I am using the term “regeneration” to stand for that work which only God can do—a work which, at least logically speaking, produces conversion, which God and man perform synergistically. Once regenerated, man actively turns from sin and turns toward God in faith.

5. Edwards, Jonathan. *The “Miscellanies”*: (Entry Nos. A–z, Aa–zz, 1–500). Ed. by Thomas A. Schafer and Harry S. Stout. Corrected Edition. Vol. 13. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. (Yale University Press, 2002), 462. An unregenerate man’s principle of life, the old man within, is constantly bent toward love of self. As a result, he cannot sense the seriousness of his sin, let alone treasure and rely on Christ for his provision.

6. For more on the relationship between regeneration and conversion, see John Sarver’s article titled “Dead Men Don’t Move: Why

Regeneration Must Precede Conversion” in this issue of *Church Matters*.

7. Capitol Hill Baptist Church, “Statement of Faith,” <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/about-us/what-we-believe/statement-of-faith/>.

8. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press, 2018), 10.

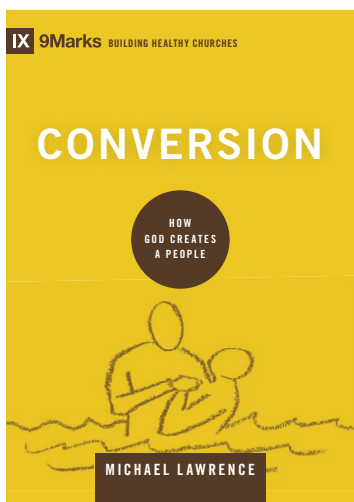
9. To take just a few examples, consider: Elijah who was hunted by Ahab and Jezebel; Nehemiah (and company) who faced the scorn of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem; Daniel who was up against Nebuchadnezzar and all of Babylon; and Jeremiah who faced widespread rejection, beatings, and imprisonment. This is to say nothing of the persecution that the early church and apostles faced.

10. Jesus said in John 15:18–19: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

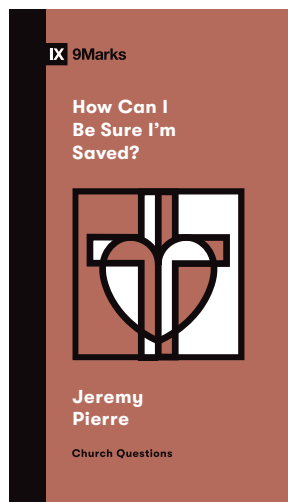


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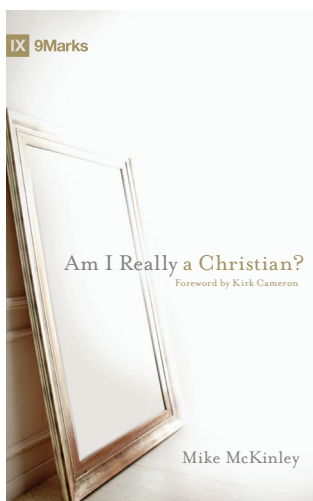
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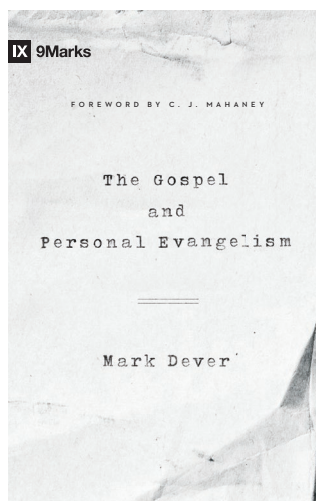
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