

Evangelism for Conversion

Loving the Lost
Pastor Josh Black
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Unconverted in the Church

The roots of our denomination go back to a man named Cesar Malan.¹ Not the same Cesar Millan some of you may know from the television show *The Dog Whisperer*! No, the Cesar Malan I'm talking about was a pastor in Geneva, Switzerland. He was ordained in the National Church of Switzerland in 1810, but the remarkable thing is he wasn't actually converted at that time! The State Church was actually full of unconverted people at that time. And their theology was horrible. Many of them didn't even believe in the deity of Christ. But that began to change in 1817.

A Calvinistic pastor by the name of Robert Haldane came to Geneva and began teaching on the authority of the Bible, the fallenness of man, the deity of Christ, and justification by faith alone. This Haldane heard one of Malan's sermons and told him he shouldn't be preaching if he wasn't first converted. Milan listened to Haldane's teaching, took stock of his life, and eventually placed his trust in Christ.

In a sermon on Easter Sunday, he preached a sermon on salvation by faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone. He also announced that he had just been converted. Many of the leaders of the State Church were there and they were outraged! Surely his baptism as an infant and his membership in the church showed he was already a Christian. This sermon was a threat to the very fabric of the church. Was he saying others weren't saved too!

Long story short, they kicked him out of the church. And he started one of the first Free Churches. (A Free Church is simply a church free from state control.) And his zeal for the gospel and the conversion of souls led him to evangelize throughout Europe. This started a movement of Free Churches that eventually made its way to Scandinavia. In the late 1800s there was a huge migration of Scandinavians to the United States. And some of them brought their Free Churches with them. That's how the Free Church was started in America.

This same type of thing happens today in America as well. We're familiar with stories of people thinking they're saved, but then coming to realize they weren't truly converted. We hear these stories when people are baptized here at First Free. People will say, "I prayed to receive Christ as Savior when I was six, but I didn't start to follow him as Lord until I was in college." Or "I grew up in a Christian family and I never rejected the faith, but I made my faith my own when I was in high school."²

This is the second Sunday in our series on evangelism. Last week we learned that evangelism is for everyone. We must all speak the gospel with the aim to persuade. That is, we must call for a response when we speak the gospel. The goal of evangelism is conversion. J. I. Packer says, "If you're not seeking to bring about conversions, you are not evangelizing."³ Evangelism is not only informing people of the gospel, it's also inviting them to follow Jesus.⁴ We see this in Paul's ministry.

¹ Calvin Hanson, *What It Means to Be Free*, 27-28; Also, [Malan Cesar](#)

² See Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth*, 88

³ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 50

⁴ Packer, 58

Paul preached so that the Gentiles would turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to trust in Christ (Acts 26:28). Paul sought to win people to Christ (1 Cor. 9:19ff).

So, if we want to be faithful in speaking the gospel with an aim to convert people, we need to understand what the Bible teaches about conversion. Our understanding of conversion will affect the way we do evangelism.

So, to divide our time this morning, we're going to learn two things the Bible teaches us about conversion. Then we're going to consider two implications for our evangelism.

CONVERSION

Let's begin with the doctrine of conversion. The Bible teaches two truths: God's sovereignty and man's responsibility.

God's Sovereignty

First, conversion is fundamentally a work of God. In John 3:3 Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."⁵ Conversion is not simply turning over a new leaf; it's a whole new life. It's not like making a New Year's resolution; it's becoming a new creation.

Paul says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). And this new life is not something man can accomplish; it's a work of God. Jesus says that we have to be born of the Spirit (Jn. 3:5-6). John 1:12-13 says, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

To be converted, we must first be born again. We must be regenerate. And regeneration is an instantaneous work of God!

But here's the thing, because it's a work of God, only God can really see when a person passes from death to life. We don't see that instantaneous work of God. In fact, to us conversion doesn't always seem instantaneous. From our perspective, conversion seems to happen gradually.⁶ This is how Will Metzger puts it:

Regeneration is viewing salvation from God's side; it is an instantaneous impartation of new life to the soul. We may or may not be conscious of the exact moment this happened to us. Conversion, on the other hand, is viewing salvation from our perspective. It is a process of the entire work of God's grace from the first dawning of understanding and seeking to the final closing with Christ in new birth. For some, this is a period of years; for others merely an hour.⁷

So, regeneration is an instantaneous work of God, but conversion takes place over a period of time. But God's at work throughout the whole process. The Puritans saw relatively consistent stages that led to a person's conversion.⁸ There are sleeping sinners who show no interest in God. There are awakened sinners who show some sensitivity to God. There are seeking sinners who begin to look

⁵ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Randy Newman, *Unlikely Converts*

⁷ Metzger, 89

⁸ Metzger, 90, 262

for answers. There are convicted sinners who feel guilt for their sin. And there are converted sinners who are born again and repent of their sins and believe in Christ.

Now we wouldn't want to push these categories too far! But it's helpful, especially when we're evangelizing. We do want to celebrate spiritual interest all along the way. But we don't want to confuse spiritual interest with true conversion.

But the main point I want to show today is that God is at work in each of these stages of conversion. Romans 3:11 tells us that no one seeks for God. John 6:44 tells us that no one comes to Jesus unless the Father draws him. John 16:8 tells us that it's the Holy Spirit that convicts us of sin. Acts 5:31 tells us that repentance is a gift from God. Ephesians 2:8 tells us that faith itself is a gift from God.

Regeneration is obviously an instantaneous work of God, bringing those dead in their sins to newness of life (Eph. 2:5). But the whole process of conversion, from beginning to end, is also a work of God.

Man's Responsibility

But that leads me to my second point. Conversion is also the responsibility of man. We saw this last week. God alone saves, but he uses us in the process. He commands everyone to share the gospel. Our evangelism is what he uses. How can people believe if they don't hear the gospel? And how can they hear if we don't preach? (Rom. 10:14). We have a responsibility to speak.

And those who hear the gospel have a responsibility to respond to the gospel. When Jesus proclaimed the gospel, he called people to repent and believe the gospel (Mk. 1:15). When the apostles preached the gospel, they called people to repent and believe (Acts 20:21).

In fact, we're commanded to repent and believe the gospel.⁹ First John 3:23 says, "And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ...." When Paul was preaching in Athens he said, God "now commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

But what does it mean to repent and believe the gospel? We have to answer this question if we're going to accomplish our goals today. If our evangelism is for conversion, and faith and repentance are at the heart of our responsibility in conversion, then what does it mean to repent and believe?

Repentance

Let's begin with repentance. Repentance is not simply feeling sorry for your sin. At the most basic level, repentance is turning. It's going in a different direction. Turning from sin and turning toward the Savior. I like the way Michael Lawrence puts it. He says repentance is a reorientation of worship.¹⁰

He gets this from 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10. In Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, he celebrates the fact that the gospel took root in these new believers. He knows they are loved by God. He knows God chose them (v. 4), because the gospel came to them in the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 5). God worked! And how does Paul know that? Because other churches in the region gave him a report

⁹ See EPCA Statement of Faith, Article 10. "We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ..."

¹⁰ Michael Lawrence, *Conversion: How God Creates a People*

about their changed lives. “For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (vv. 9-10).

The Thessalonians didn’t simply turn to God to avoid God’s wrath; they turned to God to worship him. They weren’t just looking for a ticket out of hell. They turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God! And that’s what repentance really is. It’s a reorientation of worship. And worship involves serving God.

They weren’t just cleaning up their act. Most people want to clean up their act and live a better life. You see that especially at this time of the year. But this is something different. Conversion is not just a better life. It’s a whole new life from God that shows itself in a change of worship. They’re no longer serving idols. They’re no longer serving the pursuit of power or wealth or pleasure. They’re serving God.

Faith

And that’s because they’ve placed their faith in Christ. Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. You turn and you trust.¹¹ Turn from sin and false worship; trust in Christ. Faith is not simply agreeing to a set of doctrinal truths. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” We don’t simply believe something about Jesus. We believe in him. We trust in him.

Biblical faith involves three aspects. It involves comprehension, conviction, and commitment.¹²

It begins with comprehension. We have to actually understand the content of the gospel. We have to understand the God-Man-Christ-Response framework Chris explained last week. We have to understand that God created us and that we’re accountable to him. We have to understand that we are sinners and under God’s judgment. We have to understand that Jesus is the Son of God and that he alone can save us through his death and resurrection. And we have to understand what faith and repentance are.

We also have to be convinced the gospel is true. We have to have conviction that Christ is the only way to be saved.

But it’s not enough to comprehend and be convinced. We also have to commit our lives to Jesus. We have to apply what we know and believe. We don’t simply repeat back a prayer to receive Jesus. We have to lean on Jesus alone for salvation. We have to prove we believe Jesus is the Son of God by giving our allegiance to him, by following him. We don’t just make a decision for Jesus, we become his disciples.¹³ We give our lives to serve and follow him. This is what saving faith requires. Faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:19, 26).

To repent and believe is to turn and to trust. This is the responsibility of all people who hear the gospel. Faith and repentance are the definitive marks of true conversion.

¹¹ Packer, 48

¹² Adapted from *Evangelical Convictions*, Article 10. The Latin for these three are: *notitia, assensus, fiducia*.

¹³ Lawrence

EVANGELISM

Let's consider now how this should inform our evangelism. I want to look at two implications for us today.

Patience and Means

First, we should evangelize patiently with God's methods. If conversion is a work of God, then we need to trust God that his ways of doing evangelism are the most effective!

There are many tactics today for evangelism. Many of them seem to come more from the world of marketing and sales or from pop psychology than they do from God's Word. What are God's means of bringing about conversion? We're going to talk about a number of them over the next couple of weeks, but I want to begin with three this morning: The Word, prayer, and baptism.

First, we need to teach the Word patiently. Paul's commitment to evangelism should be our commitment to evangelism. He said, "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). Paul didn't use modern marketing and psychology to evangelize. He used the open statement of the truth.

Paul's evangelistic ministry was a teaching ministry. In Colossian 1:28 he says, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." Again, his goal wasn't simply a decision for Christ. He wanted mature followers of Christ. And so he gave himself to teaching.

In sales, there's a familiar motto. Success in sales is as easy as ABC: "Always be closing."¹⁴ Always be pressing for a decision. There's a sense in which this is true in evangelism too. We do need to call people to respond. But if faith involves comprehension, then we need to make sure people understand the gospel before we try to close! If we're using a God-Man-Christ-Response framework, then we need to make sure people understand each part of the framework. And this may take time! It will certainly require teaching. So, to use God's methods of evangelism we may need to be patient.

In Acts 18, Paul was discouraged at the initial response to the gospel. He was greatly opposed. But the Lord spoke to Paul and said, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people." Then we're told that Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, "teaching the word of God among them" (vv. 9-11).

I think we sometimes get the impression that the apostles were in and out, and conversion happened in a snap. But that's not the picture here. Paul is patient. He's in Corinth a year and a half. And he doesn't just make quick gospel presentations. He teaches. And God eventually saves those who belong to him.

Second, we need to pray patiently. Paul also labored in prayer. And he asked others to do the same. In Colossians 4:1-2 he says, "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the

¹⁴ Newman, 42

mystery of Christ....” If conversion is a work of God, we must ask God to do the work. And we need to be patient, or steadfast, in prayer. Conversion, as we’ve seen, often happens gradually.

Third, we need to baptize patiently. Many methods of evangelism include pronouncing assurance of salvation after a brief gospel presentation and an initial profession of faith. This may happen in personal evangelism. Or through a call for a public response during a service. But I’m not sure it’s wise to issue quick pronouncements of assurance in evangelism. God has given us a way to pronounce an affirmation of faith. In the Great Commission, it’s through baptism (Matt. 28:19). But we should do this patiently. Let me explain.

Assurance of salvation comes in at least four ways. The foundation of all assurance of salvation comes from the fact that God saves! If we are truly trusting in Christ, then we have salvation. Therefore, we can have assurance that God will finish what he started in us (Phil. 1:6). Another way we gain assurance is through the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit testifies to our spirit that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16). But the next two means of assurance are what give me pause to be too quick to pronounce assurance in the initial stages of evangelism.

The third way we gain assurance is through our lives. Remember that repentance will be proven by a reorientation of worship. And true faith will be proven in works. The whole book of 1 John is about how to have assurance of faith. And it’s all about demonstrated faith and repentance.

The fourth way that assurance comes is through the public affirmation of the church. This happens initially through baptism.¹⁵ Baptism is the way to go public with your faith. And it’s the way for the church to go public in affirming your faith. And baptism is an ordinance of the church. It’s an affirmation that comes from the whole church, not just from the evangelist. And we are patient in the baptism process.

When we do baptism, we’re going off more than an initial profession of faith. We’re also looking for demonstration of faith and repentance. This is the approach we take when we do baptism interviews. We’re looking for a clear picture that a person has repented and believed the gospel. We want to be convinced that the candidate is not trusting in their own works. But we also want to be convinced that God’s work in their life has produced fruit. We want to see clear indication not only that a person has said “yes” to Jesus, but that they have also said “no” to the world, the flesh, and the devil. We’re not looking for perfection. But we’re looking for evidence of regeneration.

We certainly want to celebrate spiritual interest in all people. It’s a work of God. But we don’t want to confuse spiritual interest with conversion. And we certainly don’t want to give definitive pronouncements of assurance before we’ve had a chance to assess a person’s faith.¹⁶

But if we believe that a person is converted, then we present them to the church, just like we do in membership. Then if there are no red flags, the church publicly affirms a person’s faith through baptism. But this is a patient process.

So how do we have assurance of salvation? First of all, it comes from God. But the church does play a role. And the role we play initially is through baptism, not through making a pronouncement at the end of a gospel presentation, not through an altar call, but through God’s method of baptism.

¹⁵ Membership and the Lord’s Supper are other ways the church publicly affirms a person’s faith.

¹⁶ Lawrence, 99. He says, “Assess before you assure.”

Remember, conversion is a work of God, but we have a responsibility. That responsibility is a stewardship. This is God's work. Let's do it in his ways, with patience, trusting that he will get it done!

Okay, let's now look at the second implication of conversion. It will be shorter, but much more important. So, if I've lost you in the technical discussion of assurance, please give me your attention now.

Examine Yourself

Here's the second implication: Examine yourself to see if you're in the faith. Are you converted? Yes, I'm asking the question. I'm meddling.

Remember where we began. Throughout the history of the church there have been many people who thought they were Christians, but they weren't, even pastors.

Remember what Jesus said? "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'" (Matt. 7:21-23).

In light of this reality, John wrote his first letter to give the church tests to examine themselves (1 Jn. 5:13). And Paul admonished the Corinthians. He said, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Cor. 13:5).

And notice, he didn't say, "Think back to that time when you prayed the prayer. Was it sincere? Was it genuine?" No. John Piper once said, "You don't know you're alive by looking at your birth certificate. You know it because you're breathing."¹⁷ And you don't assess whether you're born again simply by looking back at some decision you made in the past. You look at your life now. Are you breathing?

Is the Spirit of God alive in you? Are you trusting Christ as the only hope of eternal life? Are you living a life of repentance? And does your life demonstrate that? Do you love God? If you do, you will obey him. And do you love others in the church? If you love God, you'll love the church. And if you love the church, you'll serve her. Do you love the lost?

Examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith. Are you converted? I'm not asking if you are perfect. But is the Spirit of God alive in you? And if so, is there fruit and growth over the long haul? I'm not asking if you had a bad week. I'm saying is the garden of your heart generally producing the fruit of faith and repentance?

When I was 21 years old, I had a crisis of faith. I was a newlywed in my senior year at K-State. I'd been a Christian since high school, but my faith and my life didn't line up at that point. I was questioning my salvation.

I remember it like it was yesterday. We were in Wichita for Christmas break, and one night I couldn't sleep. So, I went down to Steve and Susan's living room and sat in the brown leather

¹⁷ John Piper, *Finally Alive* and "[Ask Pastor John](#)"

recliner. I was in spiritual anguish. I was wondering if Jesus might say to me one day, “Depart from me, I never knew you.” Was I a fraud?

And somewhere in that moment the words of Scripture came to me. “Follow me.” It’s time to stop speculating the state of your soul, and simply follow me. Put your faith into action. That’s it. Simply trust me and turn from your sin. Follow me.

And I did. From that day on, I rose, went forth, and followed Jesus. There have been many ups and downs in my life. But the consistent mark of my life has been one of turning from my sin and turning toward Jesus.

So, if you’re here today and you’ve never placed your trust in Jesus. Or if you feel like you’ve fallen off the wagon. The response is the same. Turn from your sin and trust Jesus. Fall on him. And follow him.

And then as you go to speak the gospel, call others to do the same. Don’t give them cheap grace and a quick presentation. Teach the gospel. And urge people to repent and believe.