



Marks of a Healthy Church

Mark Four: A Biblical Understanding of Conversion

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Last Sunday we looked at the importance of having a biblical understanding of the Gospel if we want to be a healthy church. And at the end of last week's sermon, I stressed that our response to the Good News presented in Holy Scripture is *to believe and to repent*. You'll remember I said that in the New Testament those two things *always* go together. I want to talk more about this today as we address the fourth mark of a healthy church: *a biblical understanding of conversion*. It's a necessity that we understand what the Gospel itself is, but just as important is our understanding of how we respond to it and what happens to us when we do.

Conversion is all about change. Scripture tells us that the right response to the Good News is to believe and *repent*. And the Greek word for repentance literally means to change your mind. *To convert is to change*.

Now, there are a lot of people who will say that conversion is about mentally accepting the Gospel. You make a decision, you walk an aisle, you fill out a card, you pray a prayer. The change, as they think of it, might be pretty small. It might mean beginning to have some moral sentiments, or joining a church, or getting involved in some new activities, or volunteering to help people in need. For a lot of people it's not a whole lot more than a New Year's resolution.

But Scripture says that the great change we need involves much more: It involves a turning from our sins and a turning to God. It involves repenting of our sins and following God. Conversion includes both the change of the heart toward God that is repentance, and the belief and trust in Christ and his Word that is faith. As a pastor, this is where I fear a lot of people go wrong today; and they wrong in two different ways.

First, there's the problem of people who don't think that they're converted when they really are. They know that Scripture teaches that Christians are not given over to sin, and so when they do sin they hear Satan's accusations against them and they believe it.

They start to suspect, or even believe, that because of their sin they probably aren't truly Christian. If this is you, remember the grace God has shown you and the work he has done in your heart. We can pray with Joan of Arc. When she was put on trial, the judge tired to trap her. "Asked if she knew that she was in God's grace, she replied: 'If I am not, may it please God to put me in it; if I am, may it please God to keep me there.'" In fact, that's a good prayer for all of us.

The truly changed, converted, and Christian heart can say with John Newton, "I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I wish to be. I am not what I hope to be. Yet I can truly say, I am not what I once was. By the grace of God, I am what I am."

But what's far more serious is the problem of people who think they're converted when they really aren't. Charles Spurgeon, the great London preacher of the 19th Century, talked about walking down the street one day when a drunk leaning against a lamp-post yelled out to him, "Hey, Mr. Spurgeon, do you remember me?" And Spurgeon replied, "No, why should I?" The man said, "Because I'm one of your converts." To which Spurgeon responded, "Well, you must be one of mine; you're certainly not one of the Lord's."

There are people in every church who have spent enough time around other Christians and around the Bible that they learn to talk differently—to talk the Bible and to talk Christianity—but whose hearts haven't changed so that they live differently. Spurgeon preached on this problem of people who are sure they have been converted and are happy to talk about it, even though their lives don't seem to show it.

"They say they are saved, and they stick to it they are, and think it wicked to doubt it; but yet they have no reason to warrant their confidence. There are those who are ready to be fully assured; there are others to whom it will be death to talk of it. There is a great difference between presumption and full assurance. Full assurance is reasonable: it is based on solid ground. Presumption takes for granted, and with brazen face pronounces that to be its own which it has no right to whatsoever. Beware, I pray thee, of presuming that thou art saved. If with thy heart thou dost trust in Jesus, then thou art saved; but if thou merely sayest, 'I trust in Jesus,' it doth not save thee. If thy heart be renewed, if thou shalt hate the things that thou didst once love, and love the things that thou didst once hate; if thou hast repented; if there be a thorough change of mind in thee; if thou be born again, then hast thou reason to rejoice: but if there be no vital change, no

inward godliness; if there be no love to God, no prayer, no work of the Holy Spirit, then thy saying, 'I am saved,' is but thine own assertion, and it may delude, but it will not deliver thee. Our prayer ought to be, 'Oh that thou wouldst bless me indeed, with real faith, with real salvation, with the trust in Jesus that is the essential of faith; not with the conceit that beget credulity. God preserve us from imaginary blessings!'"

As I said last week, conversion involves more than intellectual assent to the truths of Christianity. You must believe, but you must also repent—you must also *change*. Now, there are lots of others who think that conversion is about living a good life. It's an effort to be more moral. It's taking responsibility to craft my own morality, my own goodness, my own righteousness. It means I've got to clean up my act and start making myself more acceptable to God.

According to Scripture, the real change of Christian conversion involves relying on Christ alone. We aren't called on to justify ourselves before God, to improve our lives a little bit here and there, thinking that somehow this change will hide our sins from God or will make our hearts appear righteous before him. No, in true conversion we begin to rest in Christ, to trust in him and in his merits before God. Real change is all about realising that we can never go to church enough, we can never teach enough Sunday school classes, we can never give enough money, we can never be kind enough or beautiful enough or happy and contented with our religious lives enough to merit God's good will toward us.

We have to realise that, because of our sin, we are truly *desperate* before God. Regardless of how good we might look to others, we are truly desperate before God. Our only hope comes in understanding that God has taken on flesh in Christ, that Christ lived a perfect life and died on the cross in the place of all those who would ever turn and trust in him, and that he rose in victory over our sins and now offers to pour out his Holy Spirit into our hearts. Beginning to have this reliance, this trust in God alone, is the nature of the great change that takes place in conversion. We must repent of our sins and trust in Christ.

Conversion is about change, but we need to ask: How does this great change of conversion happen? Jesus tells us, right from the start of his ministry, the conversion we need is to turn away from our sins and to turn instead to God. Scripture tells us to make this decision—and to encourage everyone we know to make this decision for themselves. But is that all it is? A decision?

If it's just about making a decision, should we persuade others to make this decision—or even manipulate them into making that decision? Ironically, even we “evangelicals” seem to think of the great change of conversion as sort of a religious self-help. But if we read our Bibles, we know that Christianity doesn't preach self-salvation.

Friends, that's the difference between Christianity and every other religion on earth. But here's the puzzle for a lot of people. The Bible says that the change we need is a matter of our character—a change of heart. That's the change we need. But the Bible also teaches that that we will not begin making these right choices if God doesn't first change our heart. We can't do it ourselves. He has to renew our hearts *first*.

Scripture tells us this is exactly what God has promised to do. He said through Ezekiel, “And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh” (11:19). This is the idea throughout the Bible. God gives us a heart transplant. And *he* is the one who has to work this change in us if we're to accept the spiritual truths of the Bible. As Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). Literally the Greek says, “unless the Father...compels him.” We can't come to him without him first changing our heart and its desires.

We also talk about being “born again.” This was the image Jesus used when Nicodemus, one of the Jewish religious leaders, asked how he could inherit eternal life. Jesus didn't say he should keep up the good work. No, Jesus told this very upstanding man that even he needed a whole new life—he had to be born again. And when Nicodemus asked Jesus how that could happen, Jesus said that only God could give it, and so Nicodemus must simply believe in Jesus and live by the truth.

Jesus clearly taught that we must act, but he also taught that we can act only if God's actions are behind our own. In teaching that he simply taught what the Old Testament teaches. Look at Joel for example. He prophesied great judgement, but he also offered hope when he said, “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved” (2:32). Paul quoted that same verse in Romans 10 and if you've ever shared Christ with someone you might have quoted it too. Now, Joel had just spent two chapters prophesying the judgement that was coming on the Israelites for their unbelief. So why

would such unbelievers call on the name of the Lord in this saving way? The answer is in the rest of that same verse: “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those *whom the LORD calls*.” Who calls on the name of the Lord? Those whom the Lord calls!

In 1 Corinthians 1:18-24, we hear St. Paul explaining that it's God's call that makes the difference. Paul says that most people consider the Gospel foolish, But he says, “those who are called, both Jews and Greeks” consider the Gospel to be “the wisdom of God.”

Look at the vows taken when we are baptised. They affirm these two things necessary to conversion: repentance and belief. “Dost thou renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires...and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow, nor be led by them?” “Dost thou believe in Jesus Christ...dost thou accept him, and desire to follow him as thy Saviour and Lord?” But Article XVII also affirms that we cannot do either of these things on our own power or initiative: “Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby...he hath constantly decreed by his counsels secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour. Wherefore, they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God, be called according to God's purpose by his Spirit working in due season: they through Grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity.”

Notice, we turn from sin and receive Christ, but that change only happens because we have been first “called according to God's purpose by his Spirit.”

The Prayer Book echoes the words of Ephesians 2:8. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” Again, the Bible teaches us that repentance is a gift of God and faith, too, is a gift of God, given not because of our merit but because of Christ's merit. If you would have the gift of repentance and faith, simply turn from your sins and turn to God in Christ.

Now one of the main things the Bible says about this great change of conversion, is that it normally comes through the study of God's Word. Hear Psalm 19:7: “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.” Over and over Scripture tells us that conversion comes through the preaching of and attentive listening to the Word of God. God promised it would work this way. In Isaiah 55:10-11 he says:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Think about that. God wouldn't promise this, if he weren't the one ultimately responsible for bearing the fruit, for our conversion, for our response to him. That's why we read in Acts that, as the Gospel was proclaimed in Antioch, “As many as were *appointed* to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). Neither we who have been converted nor those who shared the Gospel with us can take any credit. If any have come to know God as a result of our proclamation of the Word, we have no business putting notches in our belts, because we know that the One who converts is not the preacher. The one who converts is God himself.

Brothers and sisters, let me be clear. *We are* called to proclaim the Gospel message. *We are* called to tell people that they must turn to God. But we have to remember that in doing this, God is calling us to talk to a bunch of corpses. That's how the Bible describes our natural state: We are spiritually dead, as we saw in Ephesians 2. So how can those who are dead ever turn to God in faith? They can do so only as God gives them life. And how does God give them life? We find through both the Old and New Testaments that God has chosen to give life to the spiritually dead through our proclaiming his Word to them. We saw this a month ago when we looked at Ezekiel 37, the vision of the valley of dry bones. God gave Ezekiel a vision of going and preaching to a valley full of corpses, but through that preaching of his Word, his Spirit goes out and brings life.

Look at the example of Cornelius, the Roman centurion in Acts 10. God wanted to

bring Cornelius to himself. You might think that the sovereign ruler of the universe could simply appear to Cornelius or “zap” him and change his heart. But no. For some reason God decided to work as he has worked throughout the Bible. He would not convert Cornelius without someone who knew God’s Word himself going and preaching the Good News to him. So God gave Cornelius a vision and prompted him to send his men to go find St. Peter. Then God sent another vision to Peter, to convince him that it was okay to share the Good News with a gentile and got Peter to go back to Cornelius with his men.

It seems like the long way around, but that’s how God works, and we see him working like this throughout the Bible. When God would bring life, he always does it through his Word—through men and women who already know him sharing his Word, his Gospel, with those who haven’t heard it yet. God could have saved Cornelius in a more direct way, but instead he worked through his Word and through human agents, sending visions, and sending men on long journeys to proclaim his Word. Peter himself later observed, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, *through the living and abiding word of God*” (1 Peter 1:23).

In his sermon on Pentecost Peter preached about God’s calling making sure his promise of salvation. We’re told in Acts 16:14 that Lydia responded to the Gospel specifically because “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.” And think of St. Paul. He certainly knew something about God’s initiative in salvation. God knocked him off his horse as he was on his way to hunt down and arrest Christians. In his great love, God took the initiative with Paul. Scripture is full of examples like these. Again and again God shows the truth of what St. John wrote: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

We all understand the importance of God’s initiative in salvation when we pray that he will bring about the conversion of a particular person—that he draw that person to himself and change their heart. We know that it is God who saves, so we pray that in his great love he will pour out his Spirit that the Gospel will be faithfully preached and that people will hear and receive it.

So can you see why understanding this is so important for your own spiritual health and for the spiritual health of our church? If our conversion, if the change we have to make,

is something we do ourselves instead of being something God does in us, then we misunderstand it. Conversion certainly includes our own actions. We must make a sincere commitment. We must make a conscious decision. But even so, real conversion is more than that. Scripture is clear in teaching that we are not all journeying toward God. No, Scripture presents us as needing to have our hearts replaced, our minds transformed, and our spirits given life. We can’t do any of this for ourselves. The change each man or woman needs, regardless of how we may appear outwardly, is so radical that only God can make it happen. We need God to convert us.

Friends, eternal souls are at stake when we get this wrong—and the Church often has. Our own founders in the Reformed Episcopal Church were concerned that many people were led astray and given false assurance by the idea that they were “saved” simply because they had been baptised. That was the concern of most Evangelicals at that time. But today Evangelicals have fallen to an opposite extreme and many modern and otherwise biblically orthodox churches are full of people who have been given a false assurance of salvation, having made some kind of commitment at one point in time—filling out a card, raising a hand, walking and aisle, praying a prayer—but who have never experienced the radical change that the Bible calls conversion. According to a number of surveys in the past two decades, those who identify as “evangelical” or “born again” Christians are just as likely to divorce as non-Christians. Our children are engaged in sex just as much as the children of non-Christians are. And one survey showed that “evangelicals” are actually more likely to have an abortion than those outside the Church. Why? Why do people call themselves Christians and never experience any real change in their lives. In large part because the pastors in our churches have not preached the truth about conversion and in many cases, by their practices, have undermined the very nature of biblical conversion. The end result is that our churches are more like Elks Clubs or the Legion Hall than they are like real churches of the truly regenerated. And so is it any wonder that our churches don’t attract people. The early Church grew because it was full of people who had experienced the radical change of real conversion. They were new and completely different people full of joy in Christ. Their churches weren’t just another club. The people in those churches demonstrated truly changed lives and a vibrant joy that drew others to them. Brothers and sisters, that’s how evangelism happens. And as we share the Good News

with our friends and family, God changes their hearts, they join us, and they start the whole process over again. But that only happens when we grasp what the Bible teaches about conversion—when we insist that it actually mean something and when we understand that the repentance and faith involved are gifts of God to us and that it requires a great change that happens only by God’s grace.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us your Spirit, who takes our hearts of stone and turns them into hearts of flesh. Remind us always, we ask, that the work of conversion never happens by our own initiative, but as a result of the gracious change of heart you work in those whom you have called. Help us to grasp what this means for us as a Church. Let us never lead men and women astray, giving them false assurance in a new life they don’t really have. Let us never fall into manipulative and coercive evangelistic practices as we forget that changing the heart is not our responsibility, but yours. And Father, remind us always that true conversion is not merely belief nor is it merely good works, but is rooted in a combination of both belief and repentance that brings a truly changed life. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Note: This sermon series has been adapted from Mark Dever’s book, “Nine Marks of a Healthy Church, Crossway, 2004.)