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Marks of a Healthy Church **Mark Four: A Biblical** **Understanding of Conversion** Fr. William Klock

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“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” St. Paul wrote those words in his epistle to the Christians of Galatia. I can think of few statements more counter-cultural than that. Again, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” I noted three weeks ago that our current culture despises meta-narratives—those big, over-arching stories that give meaning to life. To grant legitimacy to such narratives, means surrendering yourself to the meaning they give. Our culture, instead, values the individual. We make our own truth. We define our own reality. We choose our own values. We are subject to no one. We will not be *oppressed* by having the meaning of someone else’s grand narrative forced on us. In contrast to Paul, the post-modern person is fully self-actualised and might say, “I live, because I know who I am and live my truth authentically and without inhibition.” Or, more simply, there’s the affirmation so popular these days: “I am enough.” Post-modernism is full of conversion stories about discovering oneself, about learning to put oneself first, about learning to reject any outside imposition on one’s identity or values. “Deconstruction” has been the method by which many former Evangelicals have too often walked this path into apostasy, creating a faith they can live while being true to themselves. But against it all stand Paul’s declaration of faith. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ [the Messiah] who lives in me.”

Last week we looked at what it means to have a biblical understanding of the gospel—of the good news about Jesus. We looked at Peter’s sermon on Pentecost, found in Acts 2, and we heard

his appeal to the people there when they asked how they should respond to the good news about Jesus and his kingdom. Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus [the Messiah] for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). What does that look like in practice? Or what’s the result of repenting, of being baptised, of being forgiven, and of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Paul sums it up beautifully in those few short words, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” This morning I want to unpack that as we look at the fourth mark of a healthy church. I’ve struggled with what to call it. We could call it having a biblical understanding of conversion, but conversion isn’t a common biblical term. It’s really only used once in the way we use it. We could say “a biblical understanding of regeneration” or maybe “of renewal”. Those are good New Testament terms that describe what happens to us when we believe and are baptised. But all these ideas point to the fact that something changes in us when we submit ourselves to the good news. Maybe we could use a phrase Paul liked to use. We need a biblical understanding of being “in Christ”. Or we could just say that we need a biblical understanding of what it means to be or—or more specifically—to become a Christian. I’m still not sure which is best, although I’ll have to pick one so I can put a title on this sermon when it gets uploaded to the website in a couple of hours. But I think you get the idea. This morning we’re talking about what the Bible says happens—or how we should understand what happens—when we respond to the good news in repentance, belief, and baptism.

I think that’s the best place to start. Something happens. When we repent, believe, and are baptised *something changes*. It has to. I’ve been trying to frame these marks of a healthy church by the great narrative of the scriptures and, if it tells us nothing else, the Bible’s big story tells us that change is essential. The story begins with God creating everything—the world, people, everything—and stressing that it was all good. And then we human beings rebelled against God. We believed the

serpent’s lie that we could be gods ourselves. We foolishly abandoned the life God gave us in his presence and became subject to sin and death. And we proceeded to make a mess of his good creation—of the world, of ourselves, of our relationships—everything. And the story shows us over and over and over and over that left to ourselves, we only make everything worse. We’ve tried philosophy after philosophy, government after government, god after god and keep finding ourselves in the same predicament. Something has to change if the cycle is ever to be broken.

Even when God called Abraham and from his family created a people for himself, even as he gave them his law and lived in their midst—they were a people dramatically changed and set apart from the nations—even they continued to need this change. Repeatedly the Lord promised that he would set things right. He promised that he would work through this people whom he had called and chosen. But to get from fallen creation to new creation requires a change. Human hearts must be changed. From self and from sin and from idolatry our hearts must be turned back to God and to his kingdom. And so he promised his people: the day would come when he would forgive their sins and set them to rights by means of his own Spirit. Jesus fulfilled those promises. By his death he forgives sins, by his resurrection he has defeated death, and by the gift of the Holy Spirit he has infused the life of God into his people. Jesus and the Spirit effect our needed change. And, again, the story hammers at this need as we’ve seen in our study of Revelation. When creation is finally and truly set to rights, there will be no place for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, or liars (Revelation 21:8)—in short, those who continue to live for themselves. God’s new creation has room only for those who have been created anew by his Spirit. The Lord promised through Ezekiel:

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your

flesh and give you a heart of flesh.
(Ezekiel 36:26)

“I am enough,” is a proclamation that no change is necessary and it will leave you for dead, Brothers and Sisters; wiped from creation along with every bit of sin and rebellion that remains on that last day. With Paul we must declare, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

So change is necessary. And we know change is possible—not on our own, of course, but through the work of Jesus and the Spirit. If God has promised that he will do it, he surely will. So what is this change? Well, first lets get some fairly common misconceptions out of the way so we know what it’s *not*.

This change—conversion, regeneration, renewal, however we describe it—is not mere intellectual assent, as if the gospel is a bit of theological truth and once you’ve heard it and accepted that it’s true, you’re good. There is a segment in Evangelical Christianity that has been so ardent in avoiding any hint of works-righteousness, that they’ve fallen into the opposite error. When I was a university student I received a t-shirt as a gift: the “Theology Shirt”. It listed several dozen theological positions and had check boxes you could mark with a permanent marker so that everyone could know exactly what sort of theology nerd you are. As I looked at it one of them confused me. There was a check-box for “Lordship Salvationist”. Huh? So I did some research and found that there’s a formal controversy about whether or not you must make Jesus your Lord in order to be counted as “saved”. There are a lot of folks, in an effort to avoid any hint of works-righteousness, who say all you have to do is believe that Jesus is the Saviour—you don’t actually have to assent to his lordship. Ideally you do, but it’s not a requirement—because then salvation would be by works, or so they claim. But this has given rise to all sorts of problems in contemporary evangelism. It’s a lot easier to get people to give their intellectual assent to the lordship of Jesus than it is to convince them to actually give themselves wholly over to

his sovereign and sanctifying rule. When I was a kid we were involved with a children’s ministry where the goal was essentially to just get kids to pray the “sinner’s pray”, then they’d count that kid as belonging to Jesus and good forever, regardless of whether or not that child ever followed through. That’s not change. Now I’m getting into next week’s topic, but this highlights that this new life is not the work of the evangelist, but the work of the Spirit. Neither you nor I can bring about change in another person’s heart. Only the Spirit can do that. We preach—that’s our job; the Spirit’s job is to change the heart. So this change is not mere belief. And Peter’s sermon should make that clear. Belief is coupled with repentance and baptism and results in a complete change of life.

Another thing this change is not is a new moral resolve. Sin is obvious to most of us and the vast majority of people would rather be part of the solution than the problem and so they resolve to be better, more moral, less sinful—there are all sorts of ways to put. Popular culture says that bad people go to hell and good people go to heaven, so many people put some effort into being good—or at least to tilt the scale in that direction. Part of the problem with all of this is that we establish our own standards of right and wrong instead of God’s standard and, this is just another case of human beings trying to fix the world on our own and that’s something that has never worked. But even when we do accept God’s moral standard as the rule, if you try to make it on your own, you’ll eventually have to compromise and lower the standard. The change we need certainly involves a moral renovation on our part, but it’s not one we can perform on ourselves. Only the Spirit can remove our hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh. Only the Spirit can fill us with a hatred for sin and a love for God that will move us to repentance and bring about the change we call new creation.

And while we’re talking about what this change is not, I think it’s worth noting a common and popular corruption of the gospel message that arose with the 19th

Century Holiness or Higher Life Movement and influenced the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements. This is the idea that conversion and being in Christ comes first and that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit comes later—or even that one can legitimately be in Christ and never receive the Spirit. It is the Spirit who effects the change and it is the change the Spirit effects that is the whole point of the new covenant. The law is no longer written on stone, an external source calling us to change. The law is now written on our hearts by the Spirit, who changes us from the inside out. And it’s this change, the renewed heart and the presence of the gifts of the Spirit, a hatred for sin, the confession that Jesus is Lord, these are what manifest the indwelling of the Spirit in the new believer. The Spirit is not an accessory to the faith for mature believers or a new spiritual level to unlock as we progress. The Spirit is, quite literally, the heart of the Christian life from the very beginning.

So back to my earlier question: What is this change? The story points us in the right direction. This change is a change of heart, one that undoes our rebellion against God and turns our love and our loyalty back to him. It’s a change that aligns our loyalties and values with those of his kingdom and his new creation. It’s a change that produces a longing for life in his presence. Instead of grasping after his throne for ourselves, our greatest desire is to give him the glory he is due. And it’s a change that longs for God’s new creation, for its fulfilment, and for us to be a part of it.

This is why Peter stressed repentance and baptism on our part. Repentance means to turn around. For the Jewish men there on Pentecost it meant not just turning from sin, but letting go of all the wrong ideas and expectations they’d had about the Lord and about his Messiah and about his kingdom. Everyone had something to let go of. The Zealots had to let go of their violent political ambitions that they hoped would bring the kingdom. The Pharisees had to let go of the boundaries they’d drawn. And

as the good news went out to the gentiles, repentance meant turning away from their own idolatries, sins, and sources of security. Repentance is a change of loyalties. We turn aside from everything that is not Jesus so that we can give him our all. We don't know with certainty what baptismal formula was used in those early days, but our own clearly emphasizes this repentance when the candidate is asked:

Do you renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that you will not follow, nor be led by them.

And, of course, that was Peter's second instruction: repent *and be baptised*. So often the death and resurrection of Jesus are compared by the New Testament writers to Israel's exodus from Egypt, but where that was a deliverance from bondage to Pharaoh, Jesus delivers us from bondage to sin and death. In the old exodus, the Lord led his people to the Red Sea and parted the waters. On the other side was a promise of new life in his presence. The waters of the Red Sea pointed forward to our baptism. The baptismal waters represent God's promise of forgiveness and new life and so, like Israel passing through the Red Sea in faith, we pass through the waters of baptism and we come out the other side into a new life. Baptism is the means the Lord has given us to take this step of faith, to repent and to take hold of his promise.

And, Peter says, when we take this step of faith, our sins are forgiven—we are made right with God—and we are filled with the life of the Spirit. And it's the Spirit who renews our minds and regenerates our hearts, who turns our desires from self to a love for God and a desire for holiness. The Spirit does a work of new creation in us that anticipates the resurrection that will take place at some point in the future.

It's a bit of an odd thing. Peter talks about repenting and being baptised and then receiving the Holy Spirit, but the scriptures tell us that it is the Spirit

already working in us that moves us to repent and believe in the first place. On the one hand we're told repeatedly that we have to act. Think of Jesus and his urgent words to Israel: "Repent, because the kingdom is here." Or when Nicodemus came to him in the night and Jesus stressed: "You must be born again." But we've have the Lord's words through Ezekiel: "I've got to remove your heart of stone and I've got to give you a heart of flesh." And we've also got Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. What brought the bones back to life? They didn't come back to life on their own. The life came in response to hearing the word of God. The word and the Spirit work together to bring us to repentance and faith, which is why Jesus could say a few chapters later in John 6:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.

Or as St. Paul wrote the Corinthians:

We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
(1 Corinthians 1:18-24)

Or consider Paul's words to the Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.
(Ephesians 2:8)

The English Reformers expressed this need for the Spirit's work in our hearts in Article XVII of our Articles of Religion:

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 though 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.

That this change is the fruit of God's word and of God's Spirit ought to be a source of assurance for us. Consider his promise to his people in Isaiah 55:10-11.

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.

God's word does not return empty. It accomplishes that which he purposes. Again, the conversion of the heart is not something that lies with us, but with him. We preach the word and the Spirit brings life. And this shouldn't just inform how we proclaim the good news, it should also be an encouragement for the Christian who lacks assurance of his own standing with God. Brothers and Sisters, if you're worried about where you stand with God. If you're concerned about holiness and troubled by your sin. That right there is evidence that the Spirit is doing his work in your heart. Maybe you've never repented and if that's you, repent now and the Spirit will continue to do his work in your heart. If you have repented, keep repenting. If you've been baptised, remember God's promise to you as you passed through those waters and continue each day to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil and to hold tightly to Jesus and the Spirit will continue to do his work in you. God's promises are sure and his word and his Spirit accomplish what he gives them to do.

Finally, now, what does this change look like? Since I've stressed the work of the spirit in our lives so much today, I might as well start there. This change will manifest itself as we bear the fruit of the Spirit. The life transformed by the good news about Jesus will manifest

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—the values of the kingdom. We will grow to hate sin and to love holiness and we will do what whatever it takes to separate ourselves from sin and to attach ourselves to holiness. We will seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, trusting that he will take care of everything else. We will be on-earth-as-in-heaven people—not just committed to holiness in our own lives, but committed to bringing God’s love and mercy, his justice and peace to the world around us.

Second, we will have a hunger for God’s word. God works in us by his word and Spirit. As we immerse ourselves in his word he speaks and his Spirit then applies it to our hearts. Those in whom God has begun this great change, those who have known the love of God revealed at the cross in Jesus and who grow more and more to love him in return will desire to hear his voice and to know his will. If you don’t communicate with your spouse, you’ll struggle to every know him or her, you’ll never know what his or her desires are, and as a result you’ll struggle to please him or her. Just so, if we fail to let God speak to us through his word, we will never fully know him, will never fully know his desires for us, and will struggle to please him. If we are in Christ, if the Spirit lives in us, we will hunger for God’s word, we will submit ourselves to it, and we will let it shape and transform us.

And third, this change will give us a love for the Church. You cannot profess to love Jesus while despising and being apart from his body. There is no such thing as a loner Christian. The people of God are a community and as a community we walk together, we do life together, we work for his kingdom together. Here we exhort and teach each other, we learn to love and to forgive each other, we study the scriptures and grow with each other. Here we learn to bear each other’s burdens, to cry with each other and to rejoice with each other. Through the Church Jesus invites us to his Table where we participate each time in the mighty acts of God

through which he has delivered us from sin and death. What the Lord did for Israel in the Passover meal, reminding them of their identity in him and shaping them as a people, he does for us in the Lord’s Supper. The great change does not happen apart from the Church.

Does this change happen instantly and all at once? No. Our culture is obsessed with shortcuts and instant gratification, but there are no shortcuts to holiness. God works in us by his Spirit and his Spirit works through these means of grace he has given: through his word, through his Church, through his sacraments. If we will eat the food he has given, his Spirit will put it to work to strengthen our faith and to grow us into the likeness of Jesus. As Paul wrote to the Philippians

I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.
(Philippians 1:6)

It will take time—just as God’s work to renew the whole of creation is taking time—but because this work is the fruit of God’s word and God’s Spirit, it will surely be accomplished. When I was a kid we had a Polaroid. You’d take a photo, the camera would spit it out and then you’d have to wait what seemed an interminably long time for the image to slowly develop. We’d run around the room waving it in the air or putting it under the light thinking that would make the image appear faster. It didn’t. Everything the photo needed was there already. You just had to wait for the chemicals to do their work. And just so with the Christian life, Brothers and Sisters. We get impatient. Sometimes we try shortcuts. Sometimes we’re tempted to give up. Don’t. Rest in Jesus. Immerse yourself in his word. Come to his Table. Live this new life as part of his body. Pray. And his Spirit will make you the new creation God intends for you to be.

Let’s pray: Sovereign and gracious Father, we give you thanks that the power for our renewal lies not with us, but with you. If it were up to us, we would be dead in our sins forever, but

by your grace we have been given the gift of faith, we have been forgiven, and we are being made new day by day. Teach us to trust in your grace. When we are tempted to think that we can do it, remind us of your grace so that we fall back to reliance on your word, on your Spirit, so that will never neglect the means of grace that you have given: your church, your sacraments, a life of prayer. We repent, we believe, we’ve passed through the waters of baptism to receive your promise. You have adopted us, your sons and daughters, and have filled us with your Spirit. Make us new by your sovereign grace we ask, so that we may truly say with Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” Amen.