

True Conversion: The Foundation of Making Disciples Part 2
Matthew 28:16-20

“And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”
Joel 2:32

Introduction: Each generation can look back with fondness on aspects of life that helped shape them positively, while simultaneously acknowledging that some well-intentioned methods and actions had a negative impact. Some generations had a high view of MORALITY (which is good), but this also led to many hiding their sin and having no pathway for redemption. Current generations have a high view of empathy and acceptance but have sacrificed the truth of absolutes and TRUTH.

As a teenager who grew up in America in the 90's, we got to experience the growth and popularity of **mega-churches** (a phenomenon largely unknown before the 80's, but which provided venues, resources, and finances for bigger and better events), **evangelistic concerts** (can you say *Michael W. Smith* and *D.C. Talk* y'all!), **purity rings, getting rid of your 'secular' music**, and the outreach events that included the emotional, dramatic story of a past of drugs and abject sin and then a radical change, which as a 'good' kid in the church always made me a bit jealous that I never experienced that level of rebellion. Each of these was *well-intentioned, produced some positive results, but also came at a cost for many*. In an article written by Kristen Lavalley, the author captures some of the angst that came out of that generation called *“How evangelicalism wore a generation out”*:

“Jesus said his yoke was easy and light, but the church added on a lot of things that made following Jesus heavy and hard.

*The Evangelical Church raised two generations of kids (not coincidentally - the age group that largely represents the deconstruction landscape: millennials and gen-x) in a tradition that **taught an imbalanced theology of sin and hell and hyper-fixated on the end times as a mode of creating converts. Pastors and evangelists used shock tactics, heightened emotional environments, moralism, and fear to create converts and it worked, but it didn't necessarily stick.***

*If you were a teenager in the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s, your faith was formed by stories of martyrs, both overseas and in high school classrooms. We called ourselves **Jesus Freaks** and fantasized about what we'd do when we were asked the inevitable question with a knife to our throats, **'Do you believe in God?'** We read **The Left Behind** series and it became our doctrine. We looked to the skies and lived our lives expecting Jesus to show up in any moment. **We feared** he'd reject us from heaven forever if he came back when we were sinning so we gave up our music, our entertainment, our fun, lest one little gray area decision lead to our eternal damnation.*

We lived with shame and called it conviction.”

This, of course, was NOT the experience of everyone, but it does illustrate an exceptionally important point for the church when it comes to raising kids, proclaiming the gospel, and making disciples. Our view of **Biblical conversion** will shape our methods in reaching and teaching people to follow Christ. When we revert to the way of **shame, fear, or hyper emotionalism**, we may see results, but it will often result in burnout, or turning away, or the popular term today, *'deconstruction'*. Or put it another way, if

we do not teach the entirety of the gospel in a manner that reflects the reality that **only God can transform a life from death to life**, we will leave people in deception and despair.

So this morning we want to look at the change that comes through the gospel as God **converts** sinners from rebels to sons and daughters, and **how** that change comes about, and **what** that change ultimately means.

What Has God Done in the Gospel?

If you had to summarize the gospel in a few minutes or a paragraph, how would you do it? The gospel is simple enough for a pre-elementary child to understand but complex enough that we will take a lifetime to truly appreciate and grapple with its immensity. In Paul Washer's book *"The Gospel Call and True Conversion"*, he summarized God's work in the gospel, based on the *Westminster Confession*, this way:

*"According to God's eternal plan and good pleasure, the Son of God, equal with the Father and the exact representation of His nature, willingly left the glory of heaven, was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin, and was born the God-man. He walked on this earth in perfect obedience to the law of God, and then, in the fullness of time, He was rejected by men and crucified. On the cross, He carried the sins of His people, was forsaken by God, suffered divine wrath, and died condemned. On the third day, God raised him from the dead as a public declaration that His death was accepted, the punishment for sin was paid, the demands of justice were satisfied, and the wrath of God was appeased. Forty days after the resurrection, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, ascended to heaven, where He sat down at the right hand of God the Father and was given glory, honor, and dominion over all. There, in the presence of God, He represents His people and makes requests and petitions to God on their behalf. **This is the good news of God and of Jesus Christ, His Son.**"*

If this is the reality of what God does, what is expected and what transpires with us IN the gospel?

What Change Does the Gospel Make?

The Desperate Situation: The start of any conversation about conversion, discipleship, or salvation must include an acknowledgement of the *reality of sin*, its offense to God, and the *total permeation of sins effects on humanity itself*. Humanity has grossly fallen short of God's glory and is in need of grace, though God owes His grace to no one. Though God created us to worship Him in an intimate relationship, because of Adam's sin, we have been born *INTO sin*, meaning we are sinful from conception and enter the world as rebels. We are in a desperate situation, and without **transforming change**, we are destined for misery and wrath, deservedly so. Here is how **Romans 3:9-20** describes us:

⁹ What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, **are under sin**, ¹⁰ as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ **no one understands;**

no one seeks for God.

¹² **All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;**

no one does good,

not even one."

¹³ **"Their throat is an open grave;**

they use their tongues to deceive."

14 “The venom of asps is under their lips.”
 “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”
 15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood;
 16 in their paths are ruin and misery,
 17 and the way of peace they have not known.”
 18 **“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”**

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ **For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight**, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

To summarize our plight, we are NOT good people who have messed up and need to get back to our goodness. We are **unrighteous** people who live out of our sinful hearts, running AWAY from God, and even if we WANTED to, no amount of being obedient to God’s commands could change that. God’s law was never meant to save us, but to reveal our sinful inability to save ourselves. Without seeing the NEED for change, change will not come. The **depth** that we see that need will determine the pathway of change sought after.

The Search for Change: *Is change possible?* By change we mean true, internal change, not just behavior modification. The military and athletics have proven that you can get someone to discipline themselves and conform for a time for a greater goal, but neither can change a person’s nature. What does someone try in our world when they are miserable, or guilt laden, or have shame, or toxic relationships? There is a focus on **coping**, which includes *avoidance, escape, denial, or evasion*. We will try our hand at **behavior modification, search for answers within** (self-acceptance and realization), and the right support of others. This comes from working harder, changing circumstances (job, marriage, locale), since these can be hindrances to change and happiness. If an activity that I desire makes me *feel guilty or shameful* I simply need to surround myself with people who tell me it’s approved and rid myself of any truth that brings conviction. This, of course, cannot lead to the happiness, joy, and contentment that is longed for, but simply exchanges one vice for another.

But is fundamental change possible? Can someone move from addiction to freedom? Can someone be transformed from a liar to truth-teller, an adulterer to a pure, one-woman man, from an angry person to one who is tenderhearted and kind? No amount of coaching, techniques and support can do this, but only something that is powerful enough to literally change us from the inside out, to scrub us clean, to give us new hearts and pure minds. *But how is the gospel enacted?*

The Means of Change: CONVERSION is the term we use to describe what the gospel does in our lives. It is what allows us to move from *worshipping ourselves to worshipping God; from guilt to forgiveness; from shame to freedom; from condemned to a child*. According to Wayne Grudem, **“Conversion is our willing response to the gospel call, in which we sincerely repent of sins and place our trust (active faith) in Christ for our salvation.”**¹ It means “a turning”, AWAY from sin and TO God in Christ. This is how Paul described the experience of conversion for the church in Thessalonica in **1 Thessalonians 1:9-10** - *“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, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.**”* Notice that there is an **action** step on behalf of true believers, and **ongoing effects**. But does this mean that our commitment and

¹ Wayne Grudem, “Systematic Theology”, p. 709

decision is something that is **generated by US?** Far from it. Conversion is an *act of God to regenerate us through His Spirit based on the work of Christ for all who will believe*. It is a miracle. It is a work that ONLY God can do in Christ alone, through the Spirit alone, by the Word alone, to His glory alone. Let us quickly consider what the Bible says about our inability to respond but how God's grace enables us to respond to the life giving message of the gospel:

Our *heart* or inner man is deceptive and sick (Jeremiah 17:9-10), and we are born **dead** in our trespasses and sin, which caused us to follow our passions and desires, ultimately functioning under the demonic power of the Prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:1-3). We were living with **futile minds, darkened understanding of spiritual things, alienated from God, ignorant, hard hearted, and given over to our greed and impurity** (Eph. 4:17-20), and were children of wrath. Though we understood there was a God, we suppressed that knowledge (Rom. 1:18) in unrighteousness, with the consequence of being given over to our sin and finally a **depraved mind** (Rom. 1:28), surrounding ourselves with those who would approve of our sin so we could go on inventing evil. This meant we **COULD NOT SEEK GOD, choose God, or decide to follow Jesus UNLESS HE INTERVENED**. He is not a God who begs us to accept Him; He is a God who radically rescues us while we were running hell-bound FROM Him.

It is God who grants repentance to the Jews and Gentiles alike (Acts 11:18), as are all those who are appointed to eternal life (Acts 13:48). God is the One chooses us (John 15:16), Calls us (Acts 2:39), and loves us first (1 John 4:10). He gives us His Word promises to accomplish all God has for us (Isa. 55:10-11), converts/turns our soul (Psalm 19:7), and by which we have been born again (1 Pet. 1:23). God has to act on us for us to respond, like Lydia in **Acts 16:14**: *"One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul"*.

But perhaps the clearest passage and concept of **conversion** is found in the Prophets, both Ezekiel and Jeremiah, which was promised to national Israel but applied more broadly at Pentecost to include Gentiles as well. The promise of the New Covenant is what we celebrate at Communion and what the NT calls "being born again." (John 3). Here are the Hallmarks of Conversion brought about by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit in those who believe:

*"26 And 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**. 27 And I will put **my Spirit within you**, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules"*

Ezekiel 36:26-27 (see also Ezekiel 11:10-11; 37; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:9-11)

Conversion is regeneration of the heart, where God removes our heart and transplants a brand new, pristine heart, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which now gives us the ability to actually keep His command and obey His rules. We can produce artificial responses from people, but we CANNOT fake regeneration or conversion, because IT WILL PRODUCE the works that God has prepared beforehand (Eph. 2:10), which could ONLY come as a result of His work.

But what is our response? How is discipleship through conversion started if NOT through a prayer or mental ascent? The answer is found in **Acts 20:21**:

*21 testifying **both** to Jews and to Greeks of **repentance toward God** and of **faith in our Lord Jesus Christ***

This is no different than the message that Jesus gave to proclaim (**Luke 24:46-49**) or that Peter preached (**Acts 5:31** – repentance and forgiveness). Faith and repentance are thus two sides of the same coin that is produced and freely given by God – but what do each entail and mean:

- **Saving Faith** – Faith in general does not save, since there are those who “believe” there is a God and creator, but do not yield to Him (Rom. 1:18, 32), and even demons ‘believe’ in God ---- and shudder at the thought (James 2:19), but not many fight for that type of belief saving Satan’s minions. No, saving faith is a personal trust, a committed ascent to what we believe. It is a trust in Jesus as a living person for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life. It is a belief that receives HIM (John 1:12), and believes INTO Him (John 3:16). **Leon Morris** said this type of faith in the New Testament is not just intellectual ascent but includes the moral element of trust. It is one thing to believe a parachute will save you if you fell/jumped out of a plane, but a completely other matter if you are willing to jump because you know the parachute will open. This is also NOT an anti-intellectual belief, since faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of God, consistent with a true understanding of the facts (Rom. 10:17). This is the side of the coin that is often referred to in salvation, and it is true, but not complete.
- **Saving Repentance** – *What is repentance?* It is heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and sincere commitment to forsake it by walking in obedience to Christ. Repentance is just like faith since it requires an **intellectual understanding** and an emotional approval of what the Bible says about sin, and a personal decision (of the will) to turn from it, to hate it. This kind of repentance will result in a **changed life**, since it flows out of a new heart, an indwelling Spirit, and the mind of Christ. Let’s look at what **repentance is NOT, and then we’ll conclude with some indelible marks of a changed heart.**

A KEY TEXT:

2 Corinthians 7:9-10 - “As it is, I rejoice, not because you were **grieved**, but because you were **grieved into repenting**. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us.

¹⁰ **For godly grief produces a repentance** that leads to salvation without regret, whereas **worldly grief produces death”**

Notice here that there are two kinds of sorrow that is produced when confronted: one that leads to repentance which leads to salvation, and the other that is void of repentance that leads to death. Since every single person has written in their heart the law of God, including absolutes, that causes their consciences to accuse them (Rom. 2:15-16), every person FEELS bad when they do something wrong: when you lie, you can’t look someone in the eye; when you’re caught stealing, you feel bad; when you hurt someone you care about, you feel remorse; when you get away with something, you feel guilt; when you go against your conscience, you feel shame; when punishment is possible, you feel fear. These are all written into our minds and hearts as a result of being an image bearer. However, **remorse and guilt that does not produce change is like faith without works: dead.** The way to assuage our consciences without repentance is simply to justify it in our minds long enough, or keep practicing the sin enough that we no longer actually feel the nagging sense of remorse and guilt anymore. Shame is a gift that should lead us to repentance, but we can suppress it in unrighteousness as well.

True, God produced, sorrow filled grief will produce repentance, which is marked by:

- **A Change of Mind** – This is what the Greek word “*Metanoia*” means. Our once darkened mind is now enlightened with our new heart, allowing us to be **renewed in our thinking** (Eph. 4:23) since we now have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). A mind that was given over to addiction, desire, lust, and passion can now be *changed, renewed, and replaced*. This is what Paul expressed in Philippians 3:7-9
- **A Sorrow Over Sin** – The Hebrew equivalent “*nacham*” means to breathe deeply, having sorrow and contrition. This was the sorrow David felt over his sin with Bathsheba, saying in **Psalm 51:17** “*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise*”
- **Personal Confession and Acknowledgment** – Repentance always involves owning up to what we are and what we have done, taking **responsibility**, something Adam refused to do but David took (**Psalm 51:4** – *Against you, you only, have I sinned and one what is evil in your sight*) **Paul Washer** said, “*One of the greatest evidences of true conversion is NOT sinless perfection, but sensitivity to sin and transparency before God regarding sin, and open confession of sin.*”²
- **Turning from and Growing Hatred of Sin** – This means our interaction with sin should be a **battle and struggle**. Without a struggle, we have been given over. The struggle is real...and good since it is a mark of true conversion. Our life is characterized by *frequent battles, great victories, and discouraging defeats*. *Even the most mature believer will at times be caught in the very sin we have renounced* (Ezek. 36:25). So we depend on our Great High Priest Who Advocates for us and has made propitiation for us. (1 John 2:1-2).
- **Repentance for Salvation Breeds Continual Repentance throughout life** – One of the evidences of a person who has truly repented for salvation is that he continues to repent throughout the course of his life. I love the fact that **Romanian Christians were given the derogatory title of “Repenters”** under Ceausescu’s communist government in the 1970’s, which is a fantastic mark. When we believe in the power of the gospel, our security in Christ, and the gift of faith and repentance, we have boldness to acknowledge, turn from and flee our sin as we run into the big arms of our Savior. And it is here that **joy is finally realized**:

*“At conversion, a person begins to see God and himself as never before. This greater revelation of God’s holiness and righteousness leads to a greater revelation of self, which results in a repentance of brokenness over sin. Nevertheless, the believer is NOT left in despair, for he is also afforded a greater revelation of God’s grace in the face of Jesus Christ, **which leads to unspeakable joy**. This cycle repeats itself throughout our Christian life, as we see more of God and more of self, resulting in greater and deeper brokenness. Yet, the **Christian’s joy grows in equal measure because he is privy to greater revelations of love, grace, and mercy of God in the person and work of Christ**. Not only this, but a great interchange occurs in that the Christian learns to rest less and less in his own performance and more and more in the perfect work of Christ. **Thus, his joy is not only increased, but it also becomes more consistent and stable. He has left off putting confidence in the flesh, which is idolatry, and is resting in the virtue and merits of Christ!***

Paul Washer

² Paul Washer, “The Gospel Call and True Conversion”, p. 11.