



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# AN IMPORTANT MARK OF A HEALTHY CHURCH: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CONVERSION

**At my church's first** meeting back in 1878, the church adopted a statement of faith. It was a strengthened version of the 1833 New Hampshire Confession of Faith. The old language may be a bit tough, but try to press through it. Article VIII of this statement reads,

We believe that Repentance and Faith are sacred duties, and also inseparable graces, wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God; whereby being deeply convinced of our guilt, danger and helplessness, and of the way of salvation by Christ, we turn to God with unfeigned contrition, confession, and supplication for mercy; at the same time heartily receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as our Prophet, Priest and King, and relying on Him alone as the only and all sufficient Saviour.

Not many people speak or write like this anymore. Yet the biblical truths here haven't changed. A healthy church is marked by a biblical understanding of conversion.

The statement begins with the biblical call to repentance

and faith. As Jesus commanded at the beginning of his ministry, “Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15). In the simplest terms, conversion equals repentance and faith.

As the Confession continues, it provides a further description of what repentance and faith look like. It says we “turn” to God from our sin, we “receive” Christ, and we “rely” on him alone as the all sufficient Savior. The New Testament is filled with pictures of sinners leaving their sin, receiving Christ, and relying upon him. Think of Levi the tax collector leaving his trade to follow Christ. Or the woman at the well. Or the Roman centurion. Or Peter, James, and John. Or Saul, the persecutor of Christians, turned Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. The list is long. Each of them turns, trusts, and follows. That’s conversion.

It’s not reciting a creed. It’s not saying a prayer. It’s not a conversation. It’s not becoming a Westerner. It’s not reaching a certain age, attending a class, or passing through some other rite of adulthood. It’s not a journey, everyone strewn along the path at different points. Rather, conversion is turning with our whole lives from self-justification to Christ’s justification, from self rule to God’s rule, from idol worship to God worship.

Yet notice what this statement also says about our conversion. We turn because we are “deeply convinced of our guilt, danger and helplessness, and of the way of salvation by Christ.” How does this happen? Who convinces us? It is “wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God.” The statement cites two Scriptures to support this idea:

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.” (Acts 11:18)

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. (Eph. 2:8)

If we understand our conversion as something we have done, apart from what God first does in us, then we misunderstand it. Conversion certainly includes our action, as we've discussed. Yet conversion is much more than that. Scripture teaches that we must have our hearts replaced, our minds transformed, our spirits given life. We can't do any of this. The change every human needs is so radical, so much at our very root, that only God can do it. He created us the first time. So he must make us new creations. He was responsible for our natural birth. So he must give us a new birth. We need God to convert us.

The nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon once told a story of how he was walking down a London street when a drunken man approached him, leaned on the lamp-post nearby, and said, "Hey, Mr. Spurgeon, I'm one of your converts!"

Spurgeon responded, "You must be one of mine—you're certainly not one of the Lord's!"

When a church misunderstands the Bible's teaching on conversion, it may well become filled with people who made sincere pronouncements at one point in their lives but who have not experienced the radical change the Bible presents as conversion.

True conversion may or may not involve an emotionally heated experience. However, it *will* evidence itself in its fruit. Do lives give evidence of change—putting off the old and putting on the new? Are members interested in waging war against their sin, even if they continue to stumble? Do they show a new

interest in enjoying fellowship with Christians, and perhaps new motives in spending time with non-Christians? Are they beginning to respond to trials and challenges differently from how they did as non-Christians?

A right understanding of conversion will show up not only in the sermons, but in a church's requirements for baptism and the Lord's Supper. Care will be exercised. Pastors will not be pressured to baptize people hastily and without examination.

It will show up in the church's expectations for membership. Admittance is not immediate. Perhaps a membership class is offered. A testimony is requested, as well as an explanation of the gospel from the prospective member.

It will show up in the church's unwillingness to view known sin lightly. Accountability, encouragement, and the occasional rebuke are ordinary, not extraordinary. Church discipline is practiced, as we'll consider in chapter 12.

Understanding the Bible's presentation of conversion is one of the important marks of a healthy church.



## CHAPTER NINE

# AN IMPORTANT MARK OF A HEALTHY CHURCH: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF EVANGELISM

**So far, we have** described healthy churches as marked by expositional preaching, biblical theology, and a biblical understanding of the gospel and conversion. That means when churches don't teach the Bible and sound doctrine they become unhealthy.

What does an unhealthy church look like? It's a church where the sermons often veer into cliché and repetition. Worse yet, they become moralistic and me-centered, and the gospel is recast as little more than spiritual "self-help." Conversion is viewed as an act of human resolve. And by varying degrees, from bad to worse, the culture of the church is indistinguishable from the secular culture surrounding it.

Such congregations do not herald the tremendous news of salvation in Jesus Christ, to say the least.

As we turn to consider another important mark of a healthy church—a biblical understanding of evangelism—it's worth considering how much our view of this mark will be

shaped by our understanding of the previous ones (the marks that are both *essential* and *important*), especially conversion.

On the one hand, if our minds have been shaped by what the Bible teaches about God and how he works, as well as by what it teaches about the gospel and what sinful human beings ultimately need, then a right understanding of evangelism will generally follow. We will attempt to spur on evangelism principally through teaching and meditating on the gospel itself, not through learning methods for sharing it.

I am always heartened by how new Christians seem innately aware of the gracious nature of their salvation. You may even have heard testimonies in the last few months that confess that conversion is the work of God (Eph. 2:8–9). “I was totally lost in sin, but God . . .”

On the other hand, if what the Bible says about God’s work in conversion is left to the side in our churches, then evangelism becomes our doing whatever we can to produce a verbal confession. One sign that a church may not have a biblical understanding of conversion and evangelism is that its membership is markedly larger than its attendance. Such a church should stop and ask why its evangelism produces such a large number of members it never sees yet who feel secure in their salvation. What did we tell them that discipleship in Christ means? What did we teach them about God, sin, and the world?

For all members of the church, but particularly for leaders who have the responsibility of teaching, a biblical understanding of evangelism is crucial.

According to the Bible, Christians are called to care, to plead, and even to persuade unbelievers (2 Cor. 5:11). Yet we

are to do so by “setting forth the truth plainly,” which means “renouncing secret and shameful ways” (2 Cor. 4:2).

Evangelism, in other words, is not about doing everything we can to get a person to make a decision for Jesus, much less about imposing our views. Attempting to force a spiritual birth will prove to be as effective as Ezekiel trying to stitch dead, dry bones together to make a person (Ezekiel 37), or as likely as Nicodemus giving himself a new birth in the Spirit (John 3).

Furthermore, evangelism is not the same thing as sharing a personal testimony. It’s not the same thing as presenting a rational defense of the faith. It’s not even doing works of charity, though all three of these things may accompany evangelism. Nor should evangelism be confused with the results of evangelism, as if to say we’ve only successfully evangelized when a conversion follows.

No, evangelism is speaking words. It’s sharing news. It’s being faithful to God by presenting the good news that we discussed in chapter 8—that Christ, by his death and resurrection, has secured a way for a holy God and sinful people to be reconciled. God will produce true conversions when we present this good news (see John 1:13; Acts 18:9–10). In short, evangelism is presenting the good news freely and trusting God to convert people (see Acts 16:14). “Salvation comes from the Lord” (Jonah 2:9; cf. John 1:12–13).

When I evangelize, I attempt to convey three things to people about the decision that must be made about the gospel:

- The decision is costly, so it must be carefully considered (see Luke 9:62).
- The decision is urgent, so make it soon (see Luke 12:20).

- The decision is worth it, so you want to make it (see John 10:10).

This is the message we need to communicate personally to family and friends. This is the message we need to communicate corporately as a whole church.

There are some excellent resources in print about evangelism. For considering the close connection between our understanding of the gospel and the evangelistic methods we use, I recommend Will Metzger's *Tell the Truth* (InterVarsity Press), Iain Murray's *The Invitation System and Revival and Revivalism* (Banner of Truth Trust), as well as my own *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Crossway, forthcoming).

Another important mark of a healthy church, then, is a biblical understanding and practice of evangelism. The only true growth is the growth that comes from God and through his people.