

The Doctrine of the Church (Conversion and Evangelism)

Derek Berry
Calvary Baptist Church
April 2, 2023

[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was initially intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please get in touch with Pastor Derek at dberry@calvarybaptist.church.

We live in a day when the therapeutic gospel is prevalent. Many will claim that the fundamental problem with humanity is that we're selfish, lack self-esteem, or don't truly know how to love ourselves. Once we address these external problems, the renewal will supposedly take place in our lives through the help of Jesus. This is not the gospel message we find in the Bible. Our fundamental problem is that we have sinful hearts that oppose God and his law; therefore, we need a new heart capable of responding to the gospel through faith and repentance. This is conversion, the great change. Our greatest need is not that we need to be nice, but rather that we need to be new.

This morning we're in the fourth installment of our doctrine of the church series, where we consider what a local church is, how it should function, and some healthy marks of said church. In the first week, we defined a local church and how it differs from a weekly bible study. In the second week, we consider the keys of the kingdom and the first responsibility of church members. Last week, we examined the following two duties of church members, protecting the gospel and discipling others. This morning, we'll consider the final responsibility of church members, sharing the gospel with others, or evangelism. But to fully grasp evangelism, we must consider biblical conversion first. Our understanding of conversion will inform how we evangelize.

So, what is conversion? The therapeutic gospel of our age would answer one way, and the Bible would answer another. The gospel of our age says that conversion is Jesus filling the void in our hearts. The biblical gospel says that conversion is the Lord Jesus establishing lordship over our lives. The gospel of the age says that our hearts are passive, needy love buckets and that we look for love in all the wrong places. The biblical gospel says our hearts are corrupt, and we love ourselves instead of God. The gospel of our age keeps humanity at the center, while the Bible keeps God at the center. Here is a biblical description of conversion.

²⁵I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶And 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. ²⁷And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. -Ezekiel 36:25-27

This is the future promise for the nation of Israel, which now includes all those hidden in Jesus, faithful Israel. Conversion is an inward transformation in which God gives us a new heart, provides us with His Spirit, and then our external is impacted, in that he causes us to walk according to his Word. Conversion is a spiritual resurrection from the dead. It is God transferring

us from the kingdom of darkness to the realm of light according to the finished work of his Son. Conversion transforms a heart from one that hates God and his commands to one that loves God and his people. Conversion is when one is justified in the sight of God and begins their sanctification journey. Now let's consider some important details regarding conversion.

Firstly, *Conversion depends upon God's election and regeneration.* In other words, it is God who decides who will be converted, and it is God's power that produces conversion. However, this does not absolve humanity from their responsibility to respond to the gospel message. Charles Spurgeon was once asked if he could reconcile these two truths to each other. His reply was, "*I wouldn't try. I never reconcile friends.*" I hope this morning you'll see the same. God's sovereignty, or divine election, is a great friend to our evangelism and man's responsibility to respond to the gospel biblically.

As we survey Scripture, ask yourself, are the Scriptures being presented accurately? And then submit your mind and heart to God's Word. We'll consider this in three phases.

1. What does the Bible say about humanity's condition?

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. -Ephesians 2:1-2

And in Greek, the word dead means dead. I like what John Piper says, "*Dead*" means we are *insensible of the beauty and worth, and attractiveness of spiritual reality. Without a spiritual resurrection—being made alive, as Paul says—we are not going to perceive Christ and his work and ways as compelling.*"

Dead people don't and can't respond to any message you may give them.

¹⁰as it is written: "*None is righteous, no, not one;*" *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.*"
-Romans 3:10-12

So, none of us seek after God on our own. And it's not merely that we don't choose to, but we don't possess the capability to seek God on our own. Just as it's against our nature to fly, it is against our nature to seek and choose God.

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. -John 6:44

We'll come back to this passage, but for now, I want you to see that Jesus affirms Paul's usage of the Old Testament Psalm in Romans 3. We cannot come to him on our own. So, the first point is that the Bible says our human condition is dead in sin.

2. How can one be saved or converted? ~~The second point in this section is God's election.~~

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. -Ephesians 1:3-6

So, God is the active agent in choosing his people. A few weeks ago, I mentioned that in this culture, the Father would select a bride for his Son. And that's precisely what the Father has done for the Lord Jesus. He has hand-picked us and given us to his Son. We see this theme constantly throughout the gospel of John.

³⁸For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." - John 6:38-40

So it is the Father who has given the elect to Jesus for him to purchase and redeem through his death and resurrection and then keep until the day of his return. This is reiterated in Jesus' high priestly prayer.

⁶"I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you.⁸ For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. -John 17:6-10

In the Old Testament, the High Priest would pray for those he was atoning for directly before the atonement on Yom Kippur. In John 17, Jesus is praying for whom he is about to atone for those the Father gave him. And we see texts like these plastered throughout the New Testament.

⁴⁸And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. -Acts 13:48

¹⁰And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, ¹¹though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—¹²she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." ¹⁴What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶So then it depends not on human will or exertion,¹⁷ but on God, who has mercy. ¹⁷For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. ¹⁹You will say to me

then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? ²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory. -Romans 9:10-23

So, the second point was that it is God who chooses his people.

3. Is God's call effectual?

~~The last point is that God's call is effectual. In other words, those whom he chooses will indeed be converted. It is similar to Lazarus' situation. He was dead and in the grave, but when the one with the power of life and death called out, Lazarus didn't have the option to stay there. Here are a few passages that point to the effectual call of God.~~

³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. - John 6:37

⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. -John 6:44

³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. -Romans 8:30

~~The last point is that As you see, God's call is effectual. In other words, those whom he chooses will indeed be converted. It is similar to Lazarus' situation. He was dead and in the grave, but when the one with the power of life and death called out, Lazarus didn't have the option to stay there. Here are a few passages that point to the effectual call of God.~~

This should be a humbling truth. To know that God has set his affection and love on you, and he will see to it that you endure to the end.

So, conversion depends upon God's election. An equal truth is that conversion occurs when individuals repent and place faith in the Lord Jesus. So, hear me; you who hear the gospel are responsible for responding by faith. If you reject the Son, the fault will be your own. If you're having difficulty putting these two ideas together, perhaps our friend D.A. Carson can help.

A moment's reflection discloses that any other account of what happened would destroy biblical Christianity. If we picture the crucifixion of Jesus Christ solely in terms of the conspiracy of the local political authorities at the time and not in terms of God's plan, then the entailment is that the cross was an accident of history. Perhaps it was an accident cleverly manipulated by God in his own interests, but it was not part of the divine plan. In that case, the entire pattern of antecedent predictive revelation is destroyed: Yom Kippur, the Passover lamb, the sacrificial system, and so forth. Rip Hebrews out of your Bible, for a start. On the other hand, if someone

were to stress God's sovereignty in Jesus' death, exulting that all the participants did what God's power and will have decided beforehand should happen while forgetting that it was a wicked conspiracy, then Herod and Pilate and Judas Iscariot and the rest are exonerated of evil. If God's sovereignty means that all under it are immune from charges of transgression, then all are immune. In that case, there is no sin for which atonement is necessary. So why the cross? Either way, the cross is destroyed. In short, compatibilism is a necessary component of any mature and orthodox view of God and the world.

So, if you're here this morning and you've never responded to the gospel message by faith, I implore you to stay behind and speak with a member or myself after service.

To summarize, conversion depends upon God's election, and (conversion) occurs through repentance and faith. Repentance is a change of mind that results in a turning away from sin. And faith is trust and reliance on the finished work of Jesus as being enough to make someone right with God. Whenever an individual responds by faith and repentance to the gospel, they're converted. Regeneration precedes faith in Christ. It is through God regenerating us that we're then able to respond by faith.¹

Conversion affects both the individual and the whole body of Christ. And this is important to understand because members of local churches are responsible for assessing whether or not we believe someone's life matches their gospel confession. But if we have a faulty understanding of conversion, the employment of the keys of the kingdom will be sloppy. Consider the gift of God as explained in Titus 2.

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age...-Titus 2:11-12

You may have heard it said, "Jesus has been my savior since I was five, but he became my Lord when I was thirty." But does the Bible present this kind of framework? Does the Bible promise that as long as someone prayed and prayed at some point in their life, even absent evidence of life change, they are no doubt saved from their sin? God's Word gives us a resounding no! We can't separate Jesus' Lordship from his title as Savior. He saves those who bow to his Lordship. Grace is free, but it's not cheap. Imagine I provided you with a free gift of a car. However, the car is a bucket that can't get you from A-Z. So although it's a free gift, it's also a cheap gift that doesn't actually change your situation. Now imagine I gifted you with a good-running Toyota Camry. It's a free gift in which you did nothing to gain; however, it does change your situation in that it allows you to travel from work to home. Grace is a free gift that includes transformation.

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much

¹ Titus 3:3-5 & John 3:5-8 are two key texts for regeneration

affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.⁸ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹ 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. - 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

And conversion's effect corporately can be summarized in 1 Peter 2:10.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. -1 Peter 2:10

This should be a review from our first week. Think of the adoption analogy provided in the first sermon. Once God saves someone, they're automatically placed into a universal family of believers modeled through their local church relationship.

Do you see the correlation here? Receiving mercy places you into the corporate people of God. So, how does a biblical understanding of conversion impact our corporate and local body? Here's a list of what we will do as a local church that understands the Bible's teaching on conversion:

1. We'll be careful about how we use the keys. In other words, we'll be cautious about whom we admit as members.
2. We'll ask member candidates to explain the gospel.
3. We'll enquire whether or not there are any areas of unrepentant sin.
4. We'll administer Baptism and the Lord's Supper carefully.
5. We'll practice church discipline.²

And lastly, our understanding of conversion will impact our evangelistic efforts, which leads us to our second point. We've considered conversion; now, let's examine evangelism in light of those truths. Here are four ways a proper understanding of conversion will impact how we view and practice evangelism.

1. It keeps us prayerful.

In his work, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, J.I. Packer speaks to this issue. One may ask if you believe in election, why pray? To which I would respond, if salvation is of man, why pray? Here's a [few](#) noteworthy excerpts from the book.

You have never told God that, while you are grateful for the means and opportunities of grace that he gave you, you realize that you have to thank not him, but yourself for the fact that you responded to his call. Your heart revolts at the very thought of talking to God in such terms... When you pray for unconverted people, you do so on the assumption that it is in God's power to bring them to faith... What is true is that all Christians believe in divine sovereignty, but some are not aware that they do, and mistakenly imagine and insist that they reject it... The root

² https://www.9marks.org/answer/what-practical-difference-does-biblical-understanding-conversion-make-life-church/?fbclid=IwAR3uIv_TjPS2PjLj12Y6Zwth5v8Bz5cknsDHWNA9XmV30t4ilsE1P6CSLCo

cause is the same as in most cases of error in the church—the intruding of rationalistic speculations, the passion for systematic consistency, a reluctance to recognize the existence of mystery and to let God be wiser than men, and a consequent subjecting of Scripture to the supposed demands of human logic.

In other words, since God has the power to save, we should pray fervently for the salvation of the lost.

2. It keeps us from pragmatism.

I, along with many others, would say this is the cancer of our day surrounding evangelism. Allow me to give a quick and brief history lesson regarding the tale of two “revivals” in America. The first Great Awakening took place between 1731-1755. This period consisted of preachers such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. Men who held a high view of God's sovereignty preached the gospel and trusted the results of God. As a matter of fact, Edwards devoted many years to rigorous prayer that God would indeed cause a revival.

“There is very much to convince us, that God alone can bestow it, and show our entire and absolute dependence on him for it. The insufficiency of human abilities to bring to pass any such happy change in the world . . . does now remarkably appear.” -Jonathan Edwards

And God began to save and bring many into church membership. And then there was the second Great Awakening, led by Charles Finney. Finney rejected the view of conversion and God's sovereignty presented this morning; therefore, his methods proved it. This period held a low view of ecclesiology. “Let's just get people saved and not worry too much about church membership,” was the spirit of the age. There was also a reliance on high-production quality to get converts. Emotional manipulation was at an all-time high. The ultimate goal was to see someone make a decision instead of trusting God to do work in hearts. This led to many “decisions” to follow Christ, but very few dedicated disciples as members in local churches. And we have seen the effects of this pragmatic approach to ministry to this day. In one sense, I don't blame Finney. If the goal is to get someone to make a decision out of their power, why not be as pragmatic as possible? Why not manipulate emotions and manufacture responses? But if God does the saving, we must follow what the Scriptures teach, and God will do the saving. The former approach has led to many false conversions.

3. It keeps things in perspective.

Biblical conversion reminds us that we are human and God is God. We cannot save, nor are we called to save. The call is to proclaim the gospel and love our neighbors. This should serve as an encouragement in our evangelistic efforts.

4. It keeps us Biblical.

The Bible's understanding of conversion will lead to a great fervor for evangelism. This was the case for George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, William Carey (whom many consider the first Baptist missionary of the modern era), Adoniram Judson (who served in Burma and translated

the Scriptures), Charles Spurgeon, and many more. Historically, those with a biblical view of conversion have been the most active in missions. Another person to add to this list is Paul the Apostle.

⁹And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” ¹¹And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. -Acts 18:9-11

God’s providence led to further labor and not complacency.

We’ll close by taking a brief tour of evangelism. Before we define evangelism, let’s consider what it is not. Evangelism is not:

1. “Jesus loves you.”
2. “You should live right.”
3. Your personal testimony.
4. Social action and public involvement.
5. “It made my life better.”
6. Seeking a decision by any means necessary.

I want to take some time to flesh out the last point. This goes back to the idea of the therapeutic gospel in our age. A very well-known evangelical Pastor and author once said, “It is my deep conviction that anybody can be won to Christ if you discover the key to his or her heart. . . it is sometimes difficult to discover. But the most likely place to start is with the person’s felt needs.”³

This is more of a marketing or salesman approach to evangelism than the heralding of a message. And churches across America are filled with people saved from purposeless, unfulfilling lives. But are they saved from God and his judgment? This isn’t to say that God doesn’t provide us with purpose and internal fulfillment; however, when we advertise the felt-need benefits of the gospel and neglect the core content of the gospel, we’re not doing biblical evangelism. When we’re more concerned with decisions made than we are staying faithful to the Bible, we’re not doing anyone a favor. As a matter of fact, we’re only contributing to one’s deception.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones recalls the story of a man who was disappointed that Lloyd-Jones hadn’t given a public altar call after the previous night’s sermon. “You know, doctor, if you had asked me to stay behind last night I would have done so.” “Well,” he replied, “I am asking you now; come with me now.” “Oh no, but if you had asked me last night I would have done so.” The doctor replies with, “My dear friend, if what happened to you last night does not last for twenty-four hours I am not interested in it. If you are not as ready to come with me now as you were last night you have not got the right, the true thing. Whatever affected you last night was only temporary and passing, you still do not see your real need of Christ.”⁴

³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 219.

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 276.

The doctor understood what we must understand. Let us remove any ounce of manipulation or arm-twisting, and trust that the gospel will save.

What is evangelism? Have you heard the phrase, “preach the gospel and use words if necessary?” Perish the thought! The gospel is an actual message that requires heralding. And this is the means in which God saves his people.

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. -Romans 1:16

¹³For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” -Romans 10:13-15

Here are four points to end with regarding evangelism.

1. Know the gospel message.

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. -1 Corinthians 15:3-5

2. Share it individually.
3. Let us foster a culture of evangelism within the church.
4. Pray through one individual you can give the gospel to in your life.

Let's pray.