



HEBRON

Wednesday, March 20, 2019

Dr. Landon Dowden

WHAT IS A HEALTHY CHURCH?

LESSON 5

A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CONVERSION AND EVANGELISM

I. THE CULTURE IN WHICH WE LIVE

- a. **Inserra:** “Where you’re going, everyone thinks they’re a Christian. It’s like you have to get people lost so they can see they need to be saved.” My neighbor described the largest mission field where I live. It’s called cultural or nominal Christianity. This mission field is primarily made up of people who’d quickly answer “yes” if asked whether they are Christians. But ask any questions about their faith, and you’ll soon realize you’re hearing something other than the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, if you asked a nominal Christian why he is a Christian, Jesus Christ himself would likely have little bearing on the answer. For many people, good standing with God is related to heritage, rites of passage, or general morality. Jesus just happens to be a nice mascot.
- b. This disparity requires our attention, because it isn’t unique to the American South. Across the nation, the most dominant religion doesn’t show up on a census, poll, or survey—it’s impossible to detect by those methods. The most common practiced religion in America today is a generic theism that mingles biblical concepts with a hope that one is a good person—all while maintaining autonomy over personal decisions and lifestyle. In this religion, good people go to a “better place” when they die. Going to this better place doesn’t depend on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, yet somehow these beliefs still get classified as “Christian.”
- c. In this way, thousands of people are overlooked in outreach efforts because they may already be sitting in pews. Yet their lives show no evidence of saving faith. Whether the disconnect is the result of poor gospel communication by churches, fear of telling the truth, or a general misunderstanding of what the Bible says, the need is there, and it’s urgent. It can be easy to conclude that cultural Christians just need to get more serious about their faith, and so problems with cultural Christianity are declared discipleship issues. I don’t believe this to be the case.
- d. I believe cultural Christians need evangelism before they need discipleship, since they may be unsaved altogether. I believe they are many and have often been misidentified as wandering or immature believers. But while there are myriad ways to get it wrong, Jesus draws a line in the sand and declares himself the only way to God. If one’s answer to “Why are you a Christian?” rests in something other than the gospel of Jesus Christ, chances are that person doesn’t know Jesus Christ. Religious accomplishments and church affiliation don’t save.



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- e. In Matthew 7:21–23, Jesus addressed the first-century version of cultural Christians:
 - i. Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, didn’t we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?” Then I will announce to them, “I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!”
- f. These people didn’t need to grow in their faith; they needed to be saved by faith in Jesus Christ.
- g. All around your community today, people are anchoring their assurance in religious heritage, good morals, or denominational rites of passage (such as asking Jesus into their hearts as kindergarteners or going through confirmation). These people may be well-acquainted with church, well-versed in biblical jargon, and well-intentioned when it comes to their personal faith in God. But I fear that if they stood before Jesus today, he would declare, “I never knew you. Depart from me.”
- h. If we’re to bring the gospel to the nations, we must first bring it to those in our pews. Unsaved “Christians” need Christ. We must understand what they believe and know the areas of life and culture where the practice of nominal religion plays out. We must also be aware of the barriers to reaching those who need the gospel just as badly as the atheist, agnostic, or secularist does.

II. A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CONVERSION

a. Statements on regeneration/conversion:

- i. 1833 New Hampshire Confession of Faith
 - 1. 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 Savior.
- ii. The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message
 - 1. Salvation involves the redemption of the whole man, and is offered freely to all who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, who by His own blood obtained eternal redemption for the believer. In its broadest sense salvation includes regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.



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- a. Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus. It is a change of heart wrought by the Holy Spirit through conviction of sin, to which the sinner responds in repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance and faith are inseparable experiences of grace.
 - i. Repentance is a genuine turning from sin toward God. Faith is the acceptance of Jesus Christ and commitment of the entire personality to Him as Lord and Savior.
- b. Justification is God's gracious and full acquittal upon principles of His righteousness of all sinners who repent and believe in Christ. Justification brings the believer unto a relationship of peace and favor with God.

b. Our need for conversion:

- i. Ephesians. 2:1-3, And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 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-- among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.
- ii. Romans 8:5-8, For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.
- iii. Ephesians 4:17-19, Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.
- iv. Colossians 1:21-22, And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,
- v. Anyabwile: At his root, his core, his heart, man is alienated from and hostile toward God. He prefers to satisfy his sinful cravings and desires more than to honor and worship God – so much so that he is a slave to sin....With his mind set on evil, he cannot and does not even desire to please God. He desperately needs to be changed.



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c. What is conversion?

- i. Anyabwile: Conversion is the radical turn from an enslaved life of pursuing sin to a free life of pursuing and worshipping God. Conversion is a change of life, not merely a decision. This change is not a matter of moral rectitude, self-help, or mere behavior modification.
- ii. Dever: Conversion equals repentance and faith. We “turn” to God from our sin, we “receive” Christ, and we “rely” on Him alone as the all sufficient Savior....Conversion is not reciting a creed. It’s not saying a prayer. It’s not a conversation. It’s not reaching a certain age, attending a class, or passing through some other rite of adulthood....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.

d. What is needed for our conversion?

- i. Anyabwile: Conversion is a change so dramatic that it requires the intervention of God the Holy Spirit.
- ii. Titus 3:3-7, For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.
- iii. Dever: 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.”
 1. Acts 11:18, When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”
 2. 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,
- iv. Dever: If we understand our conversion as something we have done, apart from what God first does in us, then we misunderstand it....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.



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1. John 1:12-13, But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.
2. John 3:3-8 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."
3. James 1:18, Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.
4. 1Peter 1:23, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;

e. How can we know we've been genuinely converted?

- i. 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? Unless indeed you fail to meet the test!"
- ii. Romans 8:16, The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,
- iii. Considering 1 John 5:1-5
 - 1. BORN OF GOD – REGENERATION – NEW BIRTH (1, 4)**
 - a. Believing in Jesus, loving God and others, and joyfully obeying God do not cause our regeneration but reveal it.
 - b. Literally: "Whoever is believing that Jesus is the Christ has been begotten of God"
 - 2. EVIDENCE #1 – FAITH IN CHRIST (1, 5)**
 - a. People who are born of God believe the truth about Christ.
 - b. Piper: The most immediate and decisive work of God in the new birth is that the new life He creates sees the superior value of Jesus over all else.
 - c. Any teaching that people can be saved apart from faith in Jesus Christ is biblically impossible.
 - d. It is impossible to have either love or obedience without belief in Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God.



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3. EVIDENCE #2 – LOVING GOD AND ALL OTHER CHRISTIANS (2)

- a. Earlier John has said that it is a characteristic of the child of God to love, since God is love (4:7-8). Now he shows equally that it is a characteristic of the child of God to love and be loved by those who are also members of God's family.
- b. So we could paraphrase verse 3 like this: "This is the love of God, that we love others, especially his children and that this life of sacrificial Christ-like love is not burdensome. It's what we most deeply desire to do as an expression of our love for the Father."
- c. Boice: Love for others is therefore a direct result as well as an obligation of having become one of God's children.
- d. What does it look like?
 - i. Love for our brothers and sisters expresses itself with actions and in truth, especially in sacrificial service; love for God in carrying out His commands

4. EVIDENCE #3 - JOYFUL OBEDIENCE (2-3)

- a. Obedience alone is not a mark of the redeemed but obedience done in love is.
- b. Ezekiel 36:26-27, 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. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.
- c. Regeneration not only makes obedience to Christ possible but also desirable
- d. Barclay: Difficult the commandments of Christ are; burdensome they are not; for Christ never laid a commandment on a man without giving him the strength to carry it; and every commandment that is laid upon us provides a chance to show our love
- e. Boice: The commands of God become burdensome only when we desire to do something else. In that case, love for our own will dominates our love for God, and fellowship is broken; and what was intended for our good seems cruel and restrictive. The solution is to return to that position in which we love God with all our hearts and souls and minds.

5. OVERCOMERS (4-5)

- a. The main reason we don't love God and find it burdensome to love people is that our cravings are for the things of the world. What changes



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“burden” to joy is the new birth in Christ by which we overcome the world.

- b. Piper: Faith sees that Jesus is better than the desires of the flesh, and better than the desires of the eyes, and better than the riches that strangle us with greed and pride (1 John 2:15-16; Mark 4:19)
- c. The blessings for those who overcome (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21)

iv. Anyabwile:

- 1. Do we walk in the light or darkness? (See 1 John 1:6-7)
 - a. Genuine converts to Christ grieve at their sin. They hate their sins, and they desire the light of life in Christ, which is to say they desire and work to walk in integrity and righteousness.
- 2. Do we love God the Father?
 - a. There is no way to love both the world and the Father. And there is no way to embrace Christ without embracing the Father, or to come to the Father without believing on Christ. Love for God the Father is a test of genuine conversion.
- 3. Do we love other Christians?
- 4. Do we have the testimony of the Spirit that we are children of God?
- 5. Are we persevering in the faith?
- 6. Asking these kinds of questions is best done in the fellowship of the local church, among committed and growing Christians who can help us see ourselves accurately.

v. Dever:

- 1. 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.
- 2. 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?



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f. Implications for other areas of life together

- i. Dever: 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.
- ii. 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.
- iii. 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.

g. Implications for Evangelism

- i. Anyabwile: When it comes to the work of evangelism, the healthy church member must properly understand who it is that actually converts the sinner; it is God the Holy Spirit. And the healthy church member must recognize, then, that evangelism is not a matter of clever technique but of relying on the Spirit of God to bless the Word of God to effect spiritual rebirth and the radical change of conversion.

III. A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF EVANGELISM

a. A few introductory considerations:

- i. Dever: 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.
- ii. Dever: 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?

b. What is Evangelism?

- i. What Evangelism Is:
 1. Stiles: There is no evangelism without words....Evangelism is teaching (heralding, proclaiming, preaching) the gospel (the message from God that leads us to salvation) with the aim (hope, desire, goal) to persuade (convince, convert).



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- a. There is much sickness in the church worldwide because of churches calling something evangelism when it is not. “Please,” I would beg, “when you teach, don’t teach people about how to behave during an invitation. Teach clearly what the gospel is and what is required of a person to turn to Christ.” I would urge the church to aim to persuade, but to persuade without manipulation. I would encourage them not to exclude what is hard about the Christian life, however tempting that may be; not to confuse human response for a move of the Spirit; and not to lie about results. “And please,” I would say, “be wary of calling people Christians without some evidence that they are truly converted followers.”
- b. Make sure they know:
 - i. God is our Creator. He is loving, holy, and just. One day he will execute perfect justice against all sin.
 - ii. People are made in the image of God. We are beautiful and amazing creatures with dignity, worth, and value. But through our willful, sinful rebellion against God, we have turned from being his children to his enemies. Still, all people have the capacity to be in a restored loving relationship with the living God.
 - iii. Christ is the Son of God, whose sinless life gave him the ability to become the perfect sacrifice. Through his death on the cross, he ransomed sinful people. Christ’s death paid for the sins of all who come to him in faith. Christ’s resurrection from the dead is the ultimate vindication of the truth of these claims.
 - iv. The response God requires from us is to acknowledge our sin, repent, and believe in Christ. So we turn from sin, especially the sin of unbelief, and turn to God in faith, with the understanding that we will follow him the rest of our days.
2. Dever: Evangelism is speaking words. It’s being faithful to God by presenting the good news that Christ, by his death and resurrection, has secured a way for a holy God and sinful people to be reconciled....It’s presenting the good news freely and trusting God to convert people.
3. 2 Corinthians 4:2, But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.



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4. Anyabwile: Faithful evangelism must:
 - a. Be content specific, presenting the truth about “who God is, who men are, what sin is, who Jesus is, what Jesus has done about sin, and what we must do about what Jesus has done.”
 - b. “include the notion that Christ is the exclusive way of salvation,” barring the idea that there are multiple paths leading to God;
 - c. Call the hearer to repentance and faith in Christ.
5. Dever:
 - a. Tell people with honesty that if they repent and believe they will be saved – but it will be costly.
 - b. Tell people with urgency that if they repent and believe they will be saved – but they must decide now.
 - c. Tell people with joy that if they repent and believe the good news they will be saved. However difficult it may be, it is all worth it.
 - d. Use the Bible.
 - e. Realize that the lives of the individual Christian and of the church as a whole are a central part of evangelism. Both should give credibility to the gospel we proclaim.
 - f. Remember to pray.
6. Anyabwile: Don’t leave the local church out of your efforts to win the lost:
 - a. Invite non-Christian friends to church services.
 - b. Both in the way we live together as a church and in the ordinances of the church, we display the gospel in ways that complement the preached word of the gospel.
 - c. Making the local church a central part of our evangelistic efforts helps to cut the root of spiritual individualism at the beginning of the Christian life.



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- ii. What Evangelism Is Not:
 - 1. Dever: 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.
 - 2. Anyabwile: Evangelism does not depend on eloquence, using the correct mood lighting, emotionally sappy stories and songs, or high-pressure sales pitches. We are free to simply and deeply trust God and the power of the gospel to produce the fruit he desires.
- iii. Do you really believe Romans 1:16?
 - 1. Romans 1:16, For 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.
 - a. Are you confident that the gospel is the power of God to save?
 - b. Does your work as an evangelist demonstrate such confidence?
- c. **What is a Culture of Evangelism? (From Mack Stiles)**
 - i. We should long for our churches to be loving communities committed to sharing the gospel as part of an ongoing way of life, not by the occasional evangelistic raid event.
 - ii. A culture motivated by love for Jesus and His Gospel (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)
 - iii. A culture that is confident in the Gospel (Romans 1:16)
 - iv. A culture that understands the danger of entertainment (Ezekiel 33:30-32)
 - v. A culture that sees people clearly (2 Corinthians 5:16a)
 - vi. A culture that pulls together as one (Philippians 1:3-5)
 - vii. A culture in which people teach one another (1 Peter 3:15b; 2 Timothy 1:13)
 - viii. A culture that models evangelism (2 Timothy 2:2)
 - ix. A culture in which people who are sharing their faith are celebrated (Philippians 2:19-22)
 - x. A culture that knows how to affirm and celebrate new life (Colossians 1:3-4, 7)
 - xi. A culture doing ministry that feels risky and is dangerous (Philippians 1:12-13)
 - xii. A culture that understands that the church is the chosen and best method of evangelism (Acts 2:46-47)



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d. Helpful Resources on Evangelism and The Great Commission:

- i. *When Helping Hurts* – Corbett & Fikkert
- ii. *Tell the Truth* - Will Metzger
- iii. *Let the Nations Be Glad* – John Piper
- iv. *Evangelism* – Stiles
- v. *Speaking of Jesus* – Stiles
- vi. *Operation World* – Mandryk
- vii. *The Gospel at Work* – Traeger/Gilbert
- viii. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* – Packer
- ix. *Honor and Shame* – Roland Muller
- x. *The Insanity of Obedience* - Ripken
- xi. *Sharing Jesus without Freaking Out* – Alvin Reid
- xii. *The Art of Neighboring* – Pathak & Runyon
- xiii. *Striking the Match* – George Robinson
- xiv. *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* – Butterfield
- xv. *The Unsaved Christian: Reaching Cultural Christianity with the Gospel* – Dean Inserra

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