Theology: The Doctrine of Conversion

Introduction

This is the third of our four weeks meditating on the glorious truths of our salvation. We’ve seen that it begins with his gracious choice to make us his (election), and then by his grace he gives us a new heart in regeneration. With that new heart comes the desire and ability to obey out of trust—something that isn’t true of anyone without being born again.

We’re learning these doctrinal truths so that we can trust them more. While knowledge of doctrine doesn’t guarantee Christian maturity, a lack of knowledge hampers it. Maturity comes through trusting obedience of what we know. Consider and discuss whether the following quote increases your felt need to know and trust biblical theology and doctrine.

“Our age has developed a loose geniality about what people say they believe. We are especially tolerant in matters of religion. But much of the vaunted tolerance is only indifference. We don’t care because we don’t think it matters. My tolerance disappears quickly if a person’s belief interferes with my life. I am not tolerant of persons who believe that they have as much right to my possessions as I do and proceed to help themselves. I am not tolerant of businesses that believe that their only obligation is to make a profit and pollute our environment and deliver poorly made products in the process. And [the Apostle] John is not tolerant when people he loves are deceived about God, because he knows that such lies will reduce their lives, impair the vitality of their spirits, imprison them in old guilt, and cripple them with anxieties and fears.

That is John’s position: a lie about God is a lie about life, and he will not have it. Nothing counts more in the way we live than what we believe about God. A failure to get it right in our minds becomes a failure to get it right in our lives. A wrong idea of God translates into sloppiness and cowardice, fearful minds and sickly emotions.

One of the most wicked things we can do is to tell people that God is an angry tyrant, because the person who believes it will defensively avoid him if they can. It is equally wicked to tell others that God is a senile grandfather. The person who believes it will live carelessly and trivially with no sense of transcendent purpose. It is wicked to tell a person a lie about God because, if we come to believe the wrong things about God, we will think wrong things about ourselves, and we will live meanly or badly. Telling a person a lie about God distorts reality, perverts life and damages all the processes of living.”

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TRUTH

In this lesson we will contemplate how relying on the truths described in the doctrine of conversion can change your life. Once a person is regenerated by the grace of God they are able to accept “spiritual things” (1 Corinthians 2:14). They will be able to turn from their sins and trust the free offer of salvation found in Jesus. For some that turning and trusting is a recognizable moment. For others it’s a process. You can consider conversion to be the first fruit of regeneration, or you could call it regeneration breaking out in consciousness.

According to Scripture conversion consists of two related parts, faith and repentance. Let’s consider each.

FAITH

Scripture is clear about the necessity of faith for salvation. Faith is sometimes called “belief” or “trust.” Consider these Scriptures.

- John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

- Acts 16:31 They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

- Romans 10:9 That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

- Ephesians 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

While Scripture is clear about the necessity of faith for salvation, many people today are confused about what faith actually is.

Write your own definition of saving faith before turning the page.
Many people today speak positively about the power of faith. Often, they mean something like the power of positive thinking, or what actor Patrick Swayze once said, “I have a great deal of faith in faith; if you believe something strongly enough, it becomes true for you.” Or other times people mean a high level of certainty in a scientifically unproveable idea or concept.

But this is not what Scripture portrays as saving faith. Consider the following definition from the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Question 86: What is faith in Jesus Christ?
Answer: Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon him alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel.

Saving faith consists of three parts. The first is knowledge. Of course, to have faith in something, you must know about it. The second part is assent. More than just knowing an idea, you must agree with it. The Apostle Paul tells us what we must know and assent to in order to be saved.

- 1 Corinthians 15:3-4  For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

The third part is the most critical—you must trust it. We can know and agree with all kinds of facts. But it’s trusting, or resting, on that fact that sets faith apart.

Many Christians struggle greatly with whether their faith is strong enough. Under that struggle is an unspoken belief of faith in faith. It’s a great comfort to remember it’s not the amount or quality of faith that saves us, but rather the object of faith. Consider this analogy from Tim Keller.

It is easy to assume that being “saved by faith” means that God will now love us because of the depth of our repentance and faith. But that is to once again subtly make ourselves our own Savior rather than Jesus. It is not the amount of our faith but the object of our faith that saves us. Imagine two people boarding an airplane. One person has almost no faith in the plane or the crew and is filled with fears and doubts. The other has great confidence in the plane and the crew. They both enter the plane, fly to a destination, and get off the plane safely. One person had a hundred times more faith in the plane than the other did, but they were equally safe. It wasn’t the amount of their faith but the object of their faith (the plane and crew) that kept them from suffering harm and arriving safely at their destination. Saving faith isn’t a level of psychological certainty; it is an act of the will in which we rest in Jesus. We give ourselves wholly to him because he gave himself wholly for us (Mark 8:34; Rev 3:20).²

² Keller, Timothy. Center Church. Zondervan, 2012, p. 36
It’s instructive to reflect on why God made faith the instrument of our salvation. He could have chosen joy, love, hope, etc. Theologian Wayne Grudem says, “It is apparently because faith is the one attitude of the heart that is the exact opposite of depending on ourselves.” It is the perfect instrument of salvation because it gives all the glory to God. Since our faith is in an object outside ourselves, it says, “I’m saved not by my works, not even saved by my faith, but saved by Jesus; I receive and rest upon him alone for salvation.”

What are some of your reactions to the above material on faith? For instance, what struck you? Confused you? Encouraged you? What did you agree or disagree with?

REPENDANCE

The other side of the coin of faith is repentance. Just like there’s confusion over what faith means, so there is also confusion about repentance.

One place of confusion is whether repentance is necessary for salvation. The following verses make it plain.

- Luke 24:46-47 He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

- Acts 2:37-38 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

While it’s plain, it can seem contrary to grace to say repentance is required for salvation. Remember that repentance is a turning away from sin, but that’s only part of the story. In turning from sin, we necessarily turn to something else. For instance, if in turning from sin we turn to self-will and effort to stop sinning, then that’s not biblical repentance. It’s not even a turn from sin. It’s only a turn from one kind of sin to another (pride). If we turn to anything but the mercy of God in Christ, then that’s not biblical repentance.

On the other hand, when we receive and rest on Jesus for salvation we turn to the mercy of God in Christ, and so we necessarily from sin. You can’t turn to and trust God’s free grace to
save from sin without turning from sin (repentance). So, we see that faith and repentance always go together. You can’t have one without the other. They are two sides of the same coin.

Also, remember that our ability and desire to repent are only because of God’s free grace that comes to us in our regeneration.

Again, the Westminster Shorter Catechism is helpful.

**Question 87: What is repentance unto life?**
**Answer:** Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

Another point of confusion is whether we have repented of enough sin for salvation. Since we don’t know the extent of our sin at our conversion, we can’t repent of all of it. And we shouldn’t think that if we have faith and repentance at conversion, that we won’t have a continuing need of repentance. Martin Luther, the great church reformer and theologian, said that repentance is a lifestyle for the Christian. We are never through repenting just as we are never through having faith in Christ.

What are some of your reactions to the above material on repentance? For instance, what struck you? Confused you? Encouraged you? What did you agree or disagree with?
Last week you were introduced to the following quote from Martin Lloyd-Jones, “Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?”

When we studied election we saw how talking to ourselves about God’s loving choice of us needs to replace the lies we hear about shame and needing approval of others. When we studied regeneration, we saw how talking to ourselves about our new God given desire and ability to obey can replace the lies we hear about being defeated by besetting sins.

Let’s now look at the lies of cynicism and how they can be replaced with the truth of conversion. Cynicism is little thought about or confessed, despite its prevalence. It’s the (often) unspoken posture in our hearts of doubt, negativity, pessimism and disenchantment with God. They cynic has been disappointed in the past, and won’t be hurt again. It’s often the result of suffering, betrayal, or unrealistic expectations. At first it feels like cynicism will keep us safe from being hurt again, but it takes us to isolation from God and others, and a general numbness to bad things and to good things.

Where are you cynical? Where do you assume that God will not show up? What relationships, dreams or areas of your walk with God do you no longer have any hope about?

How old were you when those weeds of cynicism choked the growing shoots of hope in your heart?

Read Romans 8:31-39 in light of the above truths about conversion (faith and repentance), and how God saved you so graciously. How can those truths replace the lies of cynicism?

"No life is more forfeit than the life of the cynic.” Scotty Smith
Accountability

1. What have you been repenting of this week? What do you need to repent about that you haven’t?

2. How can you help each other fight the weeds of cynicism?

3. Who’s someone in your life that’s hard to love? Why? How can your group help?
Mission

How does the truth of conversion change how you pray for non-believers?

Who are the three people (non-church, non-believers) you are praying for?

1. __________________________
2. __________________________
3. __________________________

Steps I have taken or will take to connect with them:

1. _______________________________________
2. _______________________________________
3. _______________________________________

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Supplication

Spend time praising God for his love and power shown in our conversion.

Pray for your lost neighbors, friends, and family.

What needs do you have that your group can be praying for?

What’s one area of godliness that you can pray for each other about?