

SOTERIOLOGY: The Glorious Doctrine of God's Great Salvation

Lesson 6: Conversion

I. What do we mean by "Conversion"?

Conversion is a person's decisive turning from sin, self, and Satan to God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Biblically, conversion focuses on the human RESPONSE to the grace of God in the Gospel CALL. This response is necessary for salvation. The two critical elements that mark our SAVING response to the Gospel Call are REPENTANCE and FAITH. The word "converted" in its basic sense means "to TURN." Therefore, "conversion" is turning from sin and unbelief and turning to Christ.

Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 18:3

II. The Necessity of Conversion

Is change needed? (Borrowed from *Nine Marks of A Healthy Church* by Mark Dever)

At the heart of conversion is the concept of CHANGE.

In any area of life, whether we're talking about electrical outlets or religious identification, converting means *changing*.

The Bible clearly teaches that all people need deep change.

We're *not* OK according to the Bible. The Bible presents people as dead in sin, the objects of God's righteous anger, and foolishly deceived into being slaves to sin. (Ephesians 2:1-3, Colossians 2:13, John 3:36, Titus 3:3)

The Bible clearly teaches that no one in the world has escaped the stain of SIN (Romans 3:11-20).

The Bible clearly teaches that the change we need is a CHANGE OF HEART (Ezekiel 36:26-27, Romans 3:19-20).

This is our condition according to the Bible – *enslaved, condemned, and dead*. Clearly, change is needed.

Is change possible?

The Bible says that fundamental change is both NECESSARY and POSSIBLE.

God has made us all in His own image, with a capacity to love and serve Him. We've sinned, but the Bible tells us that we can return to God. A fresh start IS possible! This is how the Bible talks about those who repent of their sins and entrust themselves to Jesus for salvation: Ephesians 2:3-5, 1st Peter 1:3-4

Deep, lasting change is possible! (John 3:1-21; Acts 9; Eph 2:1-10; 1 Peter 1:1-9).

What change is needed?

Culture says ...

But biblical conversion is ...

What will this change involve?

Conversion is not just MENTAL ACCEPTANCE ...

Conversion is not just MORAL RESOLVE ...

But if Christian conversion is neither mere mental assent, nor a mere commitment to moral reform, then what exactly does it involve?

According to the Bible, we can never please God merely by the things we BELIEVE or DO

Our inability to please God by ourselves means that the real change of Christian conversion must involve relying on Christ alone in REPENTANCE and BELIEF (“FAITH” OR “RELIANCE”)

III. Repentance

“Repentance” is a common way of designating those who have forsaken and turned away from evil.

It involves a change of mind, ultimate loyalty, and behavior whereby pre-Christians turn from sin to God.

Repentance in the Old Testament:

The Hebrew word for repentance occurs more than 1050 times in the Old Testament. It means to turn in an opposite direction or to return in a physical sense.

²² “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” (Isa 45:22)

⁶ “Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. ²After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

³Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.” (Hos 6:1-3)

Repentance in the New Testament:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt 3:2 – John the Baptist)

¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt 4:17)

¹² So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. (Mark 6:12 – The Disciples)

⁴... do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? (Rom 2:4)

Thomas Schreiner: “The call for repentance should be interpreted not as an onerous requirement, but as a kind and gracious invitation to be forgiven.”

Repentance is fundamentally RELATIONAL.

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 Thess 1:9)

¹⁵ “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. (Acts 14:15)

True repentance means that we turn FROM SIN and turn TO GOD.

- We turn **away** from the many individual sins by which we have offended God’s character and broken His law.
- We turn **away** from any attempt whatsoever to justify ourselves before God by appealing to our own orthodox beliefs or acceptable behavior.
- We turn **to** God, and look to Him to pardon our sin, to give us right standing before Him, and to bring us into close fellowship with Him.

IV. Faith

Those who are converted repent, but they also put their TRUST in God. This act of placing our faith in Him and Him alone is the means by which we receive justification and salvation.

The centrality of faith is not limited to the New Testament. We first see faith in action in Genesis 15:6: *“Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited to him as righteousness.”* Paul interprets this passage for us in Romans 4 and in Galatians 3, emphasizing that Abraham was justified by his faith and not by WORKS.

Typically in the Old Testament, we see a focus on OBEDIENCE, as demonstrated by Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. But Hebrews 11 reminds us that faith is the root of obedience. *“Without faith, it is impossible to please God.” (v. 6)*

Genuine faith always results in genuine CHANGE.

In the New Testament, the Gospel of John underlines importance of faith. While John does not use the noun *faith*, he uses the verb BELIEVE almost 100 times.

“... these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31)

What must we do to be saved?

- Foundational to saving faith is KNOWLEDGE of Christ’s person and saving work.
 - His DEITY (John 1:2; 8:24)
 - His UNITY with the Father (John 14:11)
 - His IDENTITY as the Son of God (John 11:27, 1 John 4:15)
 - His ROLE as the promised MESSIAH (John 6:69, 1 John 5:1)
 - His INCARNATION (John 11:42; 17:8,21)
 - His HUMANITY (1 John 4:2)
 - His SINLESSNESS (John 8:29, 1 John 3:5)
 - His sacrificial DEATH (John 3:16, 1 John 2:2; 4:10)
 - His bodily RESURRECTION (John 11:25, John 20:8-9,21)
 - His ASCENSION and SESSION (John 7:33; 14:2; 20:17ff, 1 John 2:1-2, 1 Pet 3:21-22)
 - His RETURN (John 14:1-3, 1 John 2:28, Rev. 22:12)
- Added to the intellectual knowledge of these essential doctrines must be added emotional ASSENT of the heart.
- And finally, there must be wholehearted TRUST and commitment to Christ, evidenced by obedience and good works.

V. How does this great change happen?

The Bible presents conversion as God giving us the CAPACITY/ABILITY to repent and believe.

Biblical conversion involves our repentance and belief. But it is God who is behind the scenes working in our hearts to produce that repentance and belief in us. (Phil. 2:12-13)

Conversion must be God's work because we are unable to produce repentance and belief ON OUR OWN.

In preaching the Gospel, the Bible tells us that the preacher is really preaching to a bunch of lifeless corpses (Ezek 37:1-14; Eph 2:1-3). Therefore, whether we stand in the pulpit or sit in the pew, we are dependent on God to produce this repentance and belief in us.

First, God calls people to Himself, enabling them to HEAR and BELIEVE the Gospel. (1st Corinthians 1:23-24, Joel 2:32)

Then, He graciously grants those He calls the OPPORTUNITY of repentance and belief. (1st Tim. 2:25, Acts 11:18, John 15:16, Acts 2:39, Acts 16:14, 1st John 4:10)

A summary:

What God does:

1. He gives life to the dead (Eph. 2:5)
2. He gives sight to the blind (2 Cor. 4:3-6)
3. He gives the gifts of faith and repentance (Phil. 1:29; Acts 11:18).

What people do:

1. We repent of sin (Mk. 1:15; Acts 3:19)
2. and we believe in Jesus (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 3:21-26).

What happens:

1. I am forgiven.
2. I am changed.

VI. Conclusion

Why is a correct understanding of conversion **essential**?

1. It clarifies how churches should call non-Christians to repent of sin and trust in Christ.
2. It reminds churches that they must rely upon God in all of their evangelistic efforts.
3. It teaches churches to maintain a sharp distinction between themselves and the world. (Church members' lives should be marked by the fruit of conversion)
4. Evidence of conversion is the prerequisite to baptism and the Lord's Supper.
5. It is the foundation of legitimate church membership.

Next week: Justification