

Lesson Notes: A Biblical Understanding of Conversion and Evangelism

- 1) A biblical understanding of conversion is a mark of a healthy church, yet the need for and possibility of conversion is often looked on with suspicion outside of the church.
 - a) People are skeptical that change is possible.
 - i) People have come to believe that personality and the various vices that go along with it are entirely fixed.
 - ii) People have come to believe that maturity is the ability to accept and adapt to our fixed internal circumstances.
 - b) Conversion seems suspicious to those who subscribe to a deterministic worldview.
 - i) Offering a hope that change is possible seems manipulative in a society that insists that we only need to embrace who we are.
 - ii) Offering a hope that change is possible seems to be an invitation to self-hatred.
 - c) Despite this, people have a deep longing for change.
 - i) Work, marriage, family, gender, and death become nothing more than choices, and people find themselves hopeless and defeated.
 - ii) Conversion confronts the feeling of having nowhere left to turn.
- 2) Conversion is a real change.
 - a) Conversion is turning from ourselves to Christ.
 - i) Conversion is turning from our self-serving, self-trusting sin to trusting only in Christ to reconcile us to God.
 - ii) Paul summarizes conversion as repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21).
 - b) Conversion is God's work, and understanding this is vital for evangelism and the health of the church.
 - c) Evangelism that is rooted in an unbiblical understanding of conversion will likely lead to false converts and sick churches.
 - d) A biblical understanding of conversion encourages evangelism that trusts in God, whose Word accomplishes His purposes in making true converts and healthy churches (Isa. 55:11).
- 3) Conversion is a real need.
 - a) People reject their need for change, preferring to remain complacent than to respond to the call to repent and believe.
 - i) a. Churches must be clear that the Bible teaches that, by nature, we have a problem.
 - ii) People are totally depraved—every aspect of their being has been touched by the fall.
 - b) People need God—our condition is described in terms of debt, slavery, and death, and no one will be justified apart from Him (Rom. 3:20).
 - c) People need to hear sermons that reflect an understanding of these needs.

- 4) Conversion is good news.
 - a) We are in desperate need of God's grace, yet God owes His grace to no one.
 - b) An understanding of our predicament and serious conviction of sin is part of conversion.
 - c) Conversion is good news because change is possible and found only in God.
 - i) We do not change ourselves, but rather renounce our autonomy and acknowledge God.
 - ii) We recognize our need for forgiveness and God-oriented lives, experiencing both a change of mind and a change of heart.

- 5) Conversion is resting in Christ.
 - a) Conversion is relying on Christ and His righteousness.
 - i) Conversion is not our own attempt to be justified before God; nothing we do can make us righteous before Him.
 - ii) Recognizing our sin forces us to recognize that we are desperate apart from Christ.
 - b) Conversion is true hope in God's work in Jesus Christ—He sought us, lived for us, died for us, rose for us, and poured out His Spirit into our hearts.
 - c) Reliance on God is the greatest change that takes place in true conversion.
 - i) God promised to give us new hearts through His Spirit so that we would repent and believe (Ezek. 11:19–20).
 - ii) We are able to accept the truths of God because He has given us a new heart, and it was all His work (John 6:44).

- 6) Conversion is new birth.
 - a) Jesus gives us a whole new life and taught that our action in conversion must be brought about by God's action.
 - i) Joel prophesied great judgment against unbelieving Israelites and yet offered the hope that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Joel 2:32; Rom. 10:13).
 - ii) An unbeliever would only desire to call upon God because "among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls" (Joel 2:32).

- 7) A biblical understanding of conversion marks a healthy church.
 - a) A common misunderstanding is that conversion is something we do, but conversion is more than our action alone.
 - b) True conversion is the heart-transplanting work of God's Spirit, a change that only God can bring about.

- 8) A biblical understanding and practice of evangelism can be defined by what it is not.
- a) Evangelism is not imposing our beliefs on other people.
 - i) Evangelism is not an imposition of personal beliefs on others—the gospel is fact, not belief or mere opinion.
 - ii) Evangelism is not forcing anyone to become a Christian; it presents the truth, through which God works as He pleases (1 Cor. 3:6).
 - b) Evangelism is not a personal testimony.
 - i) Personal testimonies tend to neglect the centrality of the gospel.
 - ii) Personal testimonies can be a part of evangelism, but they must contain the message of the gospel.
 - c) evangelism is not social action.
 - i) Social action without evangelism is only focused on humanity; our greatest problems are not horizontal—they are vertical.
 - ii) The gospel was at the heart of the world missions movement in the nineteenth century, which resulted in true conversions and prospering nations.
 - iii) Christianity has incredible social impact, but social impact is always secondary to people's becoming Christians through the gospel.
 - d) Evangelism is not apologetics.
 - i) Apologetics is defending the faith through answering questions and replying to objections people may have about Christianity.
 - ii) Apologetics is defensive, whereas evangelism is a positive act of telling the good news about Jesus Christ.
 - e) evangelism is not results oriented.
 - i) Evangelism must be properly rooted in a biblical understanding of conversion, understanding that conversion is not in our own hands.
 - ii) Some people do not respond to the gospel, so the correctness of our message is not finally determined by results.
 - iii) Results-oriented evangelism can turn a well-meaning church into a pragmatic, results-oriented business.
 - iv) Results-oriented evangelism produces guilt-ridden Christians who blame themselves for unconverted friends or family members.
 - v) Evangelism becomes joyful when we understand our ability to be obedient in sharing the gospel.
- 9) A biblical understanding and practice of evangelism is properly motivated.
- a) Evangelism can be rightly or wrongly motivated.
 - i) Evangelism wrongly motivated is selfish, perhaps a means to argue, reinforce beliefs, or merely gain reputation.
 - ii) Evangelism rightly motivated is unselfish, manifested in obedience and love.

- b) Evangelism should be done with a desire to be obedient to Christ.
 - i) Christ commanded us to be obedient to the Great Commission.
 - ii) The New Testament records the obedience of first-century Christians, the same obedience we are called to today.

 - c) Evangelism should be done with a love for the lost.
 - i) Paul displayed his love for the lost in his anguish over his Jewish brothers (Rom. 9:1–3).
 - ii) Jesus displayed His love for the lost in His tears for Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44).
 - iii) God displayed His love for the lost by sending His Son (John 3:16).

 - d) Evangelism should be done out of love for God.
 - i) Love for God is the bedrock of evangelism, because it fights against self-centeredness, difficult circumstances, and difficult people.
 - ii) Love for God protects the integrity of the gospel, because our love for and fear of man tempt us to water down the gospel.
 - iii) Evangelism rightly motivated desires to see God glorified: “Then you will know that I am the Lord” (Ezek. 36:36).
 - iv) Evangelism properly motivated turns our lives outwards for others by sharing the good news and walking in accordance with it (1 Peter 2:12).
- 10) A biblical understanding and practice of evangelism is essential for church health.
- a) Healthy churches are rooted in the God-centered message and motive.
 - i) Evangelism should be done with honesty, urgency, and joy; it should be backed up by the Bible and God-glorifying lives.
 - ii) God will use us; He has used unlikely people like Moses and Paul.
 - b) Healthy churches want to put an end to false evangelism.
 - i) Evangelism is not concerned with a shallow one-time decision.
 - ii) Evangelism is not manufactured revivals.
 - c) Healthy churches are committed to sharing the vibrant, living gospel.
 - i) The gospel is not cold and debilitating—it’s a glorious privilege.
 - ii) The gospel can recapture joy in our fellowship as we pray together and share it with one another.
 - d) Healthy churches understand that God is at work in the gospel.
 - i) We came to know the Lord Jesus Christ through hearing the gospel from someone, so we must be faithful in sharing it with others.
 - ii) Evangelism that understands God’s sovereign work is joyful, capturing the heart and empowering us to speak joyfully (Matt. 12:34).