

TRUE AND FALSE CONVERSIONS

A Meditation on Mark 4:1-20

Four different groups of people are present in most evangelical churches on a typical Sunday morning. The first group is made up of unbelievers who know they are unbelievers. Maybe they were dragged to church. Perhaps they are seriously investigating the claims of Christianity, but they are certainly not Christians, and they know it.

The second group consists of Christians who know they are Christians. They have “assurance of salvation.” They have taken Peter’s admonition in 2 Peter 1:10 to heart: “Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure...”

In the third group are Christians who are not certain they are true Christians. They are genuine Christians, their names are written in the Lamb’s book of life, but they lack assurance of salvation. Many things can contribute to this uncertainty, like a struggle with sin...lack of communion with Christ...bad doctrine, etc.. I must stress that God wants us to have assurance. Near the end of John’s first epistle, we read, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13).

In the fourth group we have unbelievers who think they are Christians. For a number of possible reasons they are deceived about their true spiritual condition. It could be that they don’t understand the gospel of grace; they think that going to church or being baptized or being an American makes you a Christian. Here’s the irony, as Jonathan Edwards’ grandfather, Solomon Stoddard once said, “Some hypocrites (meaning those who think they are Christians, but aren’t) are a great deal more confident than many saints.”

The incongruity is that it is not uncommon for true Christians to occasionally be afflicted with a sense of dread, fearing that they are deceived about their salvation, while unbelievers, with a *false* assurance, are rarely, if ever, bothered by their spiritual condition. I would submit to you that some fear of being one of God’s elect is actually a healthy sign. Such fear demonstrates that you, at least, understand the spiritual reality of an eternity in heaven or hell that is irreversible. Paul knew that after he preached to others, he himself could be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27). My concern is not for those with a little healthy fear, but for those who are presumptuous about their salvation. Jesus warned us that this fourth group is *large*. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day *many* will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (Matt. 7:21-23).

“The Parable of the Soils” teaches us about the difference between true and false conversions. However, we need to exercise great caution here, because this is not easy (see Matt. 13:24-30). Nevertheless, we are called to examine ourselves (2 Cor. 13:5).

Jesus’ parable shows us that not everyone hears the same message in the same way and to the same effect. The different responses are due, in large part, to the condition of one’s heart. The heart that surprises us the most is the second heart, the “shallow heart.” Like all the hearts, the shallow heart hears the Word of God, but look at the tremendous response: “...when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy” (Mk. 4:16). This is a person who says after the service, “Great message, Pastor. I loved the singing. It’s wonderful to be a part of this church.” They may get baptized. They may become a member. They may serve in the church. All may look well, but be very careful here. Joy, at first, may actually be an indication of a *false* conversion. While it’s true that joy is an important characteristic of the Christian life, and the fruit of the Spirit, the pathway to joy is entered into through the door of repentance and mourning.

Jesus said, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh...Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep” (Lk. 6:21, 25). Sorrow and repentance precedes true joy and conversion. The Holy Spirit produces conviction before joy. Many have enjoyed listening to God’s Word without accepting it, like King Herod and many of the Jews who heard John the Baptist (Mk. 6:20; Jn. 5:35). Remember the crowds at the Triumphal Entry? They shouted, with joy I’m sure, “Hosanna to the Son of David.” Before the week was over many changed their tune to “Crucify him, crucify him!” If the Word has truly taken root, we will experience brokenness; we will not fall away during tribulation, and we will bear fruit (Mk. 4:17, 20).

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Website: www.foxlakechurch.org Email: wchristensen@foxlakechurch.org 847-587-1331