Transforming Conversion
Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation

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Introduction

Evangelicals are walking through a paradigm shift in their understanding of conversion. While revivalism has for more than a century shaped their language of conversion, a new way of speaking of salvation, redemption, and conversion is emerging—a change that has profound implications for our vision of the Christian life and the life and mission of the church.

Older revivalism assumed that conversion was punctiliar, that the focus of a converted life was religious activities, in anticipation of a life “in heaven” that would come after death, and that this “conversion” was essentially an interior, personal, and subjective transaction. Revivalists had little appreciation of the place of the sacraments or the intellect in the spiritual life. For the revivalist, the church has only one agenda: to obtain conversions; to be successful, congregations should have plenty of growth by conversions.

All this is changing. It is not that evangelicals are not attending to the matter of conversion; to the contrary, it continues to be a critical concern and passion. It is rather that the fundamental assumptions and categories of revivalism are being questioned as never before. Several factors have led to this change. Biblical scholars are calling for a more comprehensive theology of salvation, including both the corporate and cosmic dimensions of the work of God in the world. Evangelicals are also learning from voices that have given critical attention to the nature of religious experience, including philosophers and developmental theorists. Evangelicals are also taking account of the insights of theologians within other traditions—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, mainline Protestants—and these exchanges have had an invaluable impact on how evangelicals think about the experience of conversion.

Further, the face of evangelicalism is changing; the majority of evangelical Christians now live outside the West, and most of these are self-identified Pentecostals. A current discussion of the meaning of conversion must take account of this development: What does it mean, for example, to come to
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faith from a Muslim background? Further, how do we consider the meaning of conversion in light of the Pentecostal experience of the Spirit?

Another influence factor in this discussion is that church historians are forcing evangelicals to rethink their theological and spiritual heritage as Christians and especially as evangelicals. This calls us to recover the wisdom on conversion from the early church, the pre-Christendom church, and also to draw afresh on the wisdom of the evangelical heritage of the late eighteenth century, before the rise of revivalism in the nineteenth century. Yet most of all we pastors and we ordinary Christians are eager to make sense of our own experience and the ministry of congregations. We are eager to rethink the meaning of conversion and what this means for the life and witness of the church. The revivalist paradigm may have served us in the past; but there is an urgency in our recognition that we need a new way to think about how women and men come to faith in Christ and what this means for the congregations of which we are a part.

What follows, then, is an attempt to distill this extraordinary conversation on conversion from the past quarter century; and then to demonstrate what this might mean for how we do church. I will begin with an assessment of revivalism; we need to be clear on the language that has been so influential to date. Next I will consider the witness of the Letter to the Ephesians, the witness of the church’s history, and a reappraisal of the goal or objective of conversion. In the second half of the book, I will delineate the contours of a Christian conversion.

Finally, I conclude with advice-giving chapters. First, I give counsel to individuals who seek to make sense of their own conversion experience through the spiritual practice of spiritual autobiography. Second, I counsel congregations that long to be spaces where the children of the church are coming to an adult faith in Christ and where inquirers and seekers are discovering the wonder of God’s love through the witness of communities of faith.
What is the biblical vision of conversion, and how is this reflected in the actual experience of those who come to faith in Christ Jesus? What implications does this have for our understanding of the church and the ministry of the church? What implications does this have for our understanding of the actual character of the Christian life as a whole? The challenge is clear: to think theologically about conversion, to ask What is its fundamental character?

How we think and speak of conversion matters deeply, for conversion is the genesis, the point of departure for the rest of our Christian life. Our conversion establishes the contours for our experience of God and of the salvation of God. The whole of our Christian experience is the working out of the full meaning and implication of our conversion. To live in truth is to act in the world in a manner consistent with or at least reflecting our conversion. Therefore, it only makes sense that we should give attention, intentionally and theologically, to what it means to come to faith. This requires that we establish a clearly outlined, theologically informed, and consistent understanding of conversion.1

We need an outline of the nature and character of conversion that has internal congruence but also congruence with our own experience. With this outline in mind, we should be able to understand and interpret our own experience, to strengthen and deepen that experience, and to assure ourselves that our experience leads to transformation. The apostle Paul frequently appeals

1. For those who identify with the evangelical Christian tradition, there is particular incentive to think about the experience of conversion, especially if D. W. Bebbington is right in his suggestion that conversion is one of the four defining features of the movement and his observation that conversion is the content of the gospel for evangelicals; see Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 3, 5.
to the conversion experience of his readers as a basic and elemental point of
departure for his teaching about the Christian life.

Thinking theologically about conversion requires language; language pro-
vides us with meaning and structure for our understanding. Yet this is pre-
cisely where we—I speak here as an evangelical Christian—have a problem.
For many evangelicals, the language of conversion that permeates the public
life, worship, and witness of the church does not reflect their own experience.
They feel distant or alienated from their own experience because it does not
fit the pattern of what they believe a conversion should look or feel like. This
leads them to wonder whether their experience is legitimate. However, if our
experience of conversion does not fit the language we use to describe it, then
we are not speaking the truth about the way in which God works in the life
of individuals or the congregation as a whole.

An additional complication flows from this: if our language about conver-
sion does not portray how people actually become Christians, our approach to
evangelism will not correspond to the ways in which the Spirit brings people
to faith in Christ Jesus. Evangelism is vital to the life of the church and to
our growth as Christian believers, and our approach to evangelism must be
congruent with the way in which the Spirit of God draws women and men
into the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many rightly observe that the language and theology of conversion that
permeates our evangelical psyche is not so much that of the New Testament as
it is the language and theology (and the premises) of revivalism. As a religious
movement, revivalism is heir to both the seventeenth-century Puritans and the
renewal movements of the eighteenth century. Yet revivalism largely emerged in
the nineteenth century and was broadly institutionalized in major conservative
denominations in North America and within many parachurch and mission
agencies, which then expanded the movement within North America and
globally. Contemporary Christianity is greatly indebted to this movement;
it would be hard to conceive of the global presence of the Christian faith if
it were not for the mission agencies whose vision for evangelism was fueled
by this particular understanding of both the need for and the character of
conversion. An extraordinary number of Christians today have come to faith
through the witness of those who are heirs to this movement.

The revivalist heritage includes two invaluable affirmations. First, it stresses
that conversion is necessary and possible. Revivalism affirms the reality of
the human predicament and that the only hope for humankind is a radia-
cal inbreaking of divine grace: no self-help program will resolve the human
predicament. Our only hope is conversion, and conversion is possible. Thus
there is a deep hopefulness to this spiritual heritage: evil does not have the last
word. Second, the revivalist heritage appropriately emphasizes the need for
people to take personal responsibility for their lives and for their response to
the claims of the gospel. When this emphasis is not located within a broader
appreciation of divine sovereignty and initiative, the result can easily be a
distorted understanding of human agency. Nevertheless, we can and must
affirm this insistence on human responsibility.

Though this movement has given contemporary Christians much for which
to be thankful, it has also left us with some baggage—in particular, a way
of speaking about conversion and religious experience that is problematic in
many respects. It is urgent that we identify this language and seek a thorough
rethinking of the way in which we speak about the experience of conversion
and about the Christian life as a whole. Revivalism’s language of conversion
permeates evangelicalism in at least twelve ways.

1. Conversion and Salvation Confused

One of the noteworthy features of the language of revivalism is that the words
conversion and salvation are used synonymously. To be converted is to be saved;
to be saved is to be converted. This means, for example, that those within
the movement are inclined to use the language of salvation almost entirely in the
past tense (one is “saved”), and this reference to being saved is directly linked
to some action that the person in question has taken. A person has prayed a
prayer or has “accepted Christ into one’s heart” and is now, as of that action,
“saved.” This emphasis on right words and intentions leads many to believe
that, having done it right and simply, they are “good to go.” They can be “as-
sured” that they are children of God.

The problem with this is twofold. First, it represents an overly narrow
conception of the salvation of God. No doubt some New Testament language
does highlight the reality that through a conversion experience one has confi-
dence that one is a child of God, but other aspects of salvation language in the
New Testament are overlooked or downplayed. As a result, evangelicals have
consistently struggled with Pauline language that speaks of “work[ing] out
your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12–13) or that speaks of
salvation as a future experience. Yes, past-tense language is there (for example,
Paul speaks in Titus 3:5 of the day in which God “saved us”), but this is only

There is a second and even greater problem here, though this one-dimen-
sional view of salvation is problem enough! Within revivalism, not only is the
word salvation used almost exclusively in the past tense, but it also is consist-
tently linked with human activity: one is saved when one prays the so-called
“sinner’s prayer” or when one, to use other language typical of the tradition,
“receives Christ into one’s heart.” When one does these things, one is declared
to be “saved,” so much so that one can ask another, “When were you saved?”
The acceptable answer is to identify a time when the particular human action
or decision was made.
Although the tradition rightly seeks to emphasize the importance of human agency (“What must we do to be saved?”; cf. Acts 16:30) and appropriately affirms that our actions matter, the evangelical heritage has not adequately sustained the vision of conversion as a human act in response to the gracious initiative of God. Conversion is certainly human activity, but God alone saves. This is why it is so important that the words conversion and salvation not be viewed as synonymous: salvation is the work of God; conversion is a human response to the divine initiative.

The revivalist tendency to combine these two ideas was driven, in part, by the desire to provide a basis for assurance: how is one to know that one is saved, accepted, forgiven, justified? While we understandably long to know, with confidence, that we are children of God, the route to this confidence is not by linking the salvation of God to a human choice, the action of choosing God. Conversion is about choosing, and human actions and responses matter, but assurance of salvation arises from the interplay of a number of factors, which we shall examine in detail later. For now, we simply note this problematic merging of two ideas that, though intimately linked, need to be kept distinct. The one, salvation, is the work of God; the other, conversion, is a human response to the saving initiative of God.

2. The Emphasis on Human Volition

Within revivalism, the language of conversion focuses on volition, an emphasis inherited, at least in part, from the Puritans. For the revivalist, the heart of the human predicament is the human will, which is in rebellion against God, and salvation comes when we surrender our rebellious will to the will of God. If the essence of sin is rebellion (a refusal to obey God), then the essence of life and holiness is a meek submission of the will (the ideal state being one of compliance with the will of God).

From this perspective, to become a Christian is thus to make a decision, which is specifically the surrender of the will. A corollary to this is that any subsequent problem in the Christian life can be attributed to an “unsurrendered will.” For many Christians who grew up in this movement, the recurring question was “Is your all on the altar?” And they were repeatedly reminded that freedom and life come with submission. Revivalist preachers, then, really have only one question for the non-Christian, “Will you surrender your life to God?” and one for the Christian, “Will you rededicate your life to God?”

The movement needs to be commended for understanding that, as Bob Dylan (1979) put it, “You’ve gotta serve somebody” and that, as the apostle Paul makes clear in Romans 6, we are either slaves of sin or slaves of righteousness. They grasped that our only hope for transformation is to present ourselves to God (Rom. 12:1). However, a one-dimensional perspective on the
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The human person that too closely links our salvation and ultimate transformation with our will can easily cause those within the tradition to think that they are transformed by the surrender of the will rather than by the renewal of the mind (Rom. 12:2). Such a perspective discounts the significant place that the intellect and the affections have in human transformation.

When we view the human will as itself a problem, as the great threat to the Christian life, then the only hope for getting children to submit to God is to first teach them to submit to their parents and other authority figures. The revivalists apparently inherited this view from their Puritan fathers and mothers, who believed that the chief task in raising children was to break their will, because the will was viewed as the problem. Good children, then, were obedient children, meaning compliant children. In this environment, any proclivity toward independence or mischievousness or creativity, or any threat to parental authority, was quickly branded as rebellion, the greatest possible affront to God.

A popular contemporary book on child raising that reflects the revivalist heritage actually focuses on what is termed a “strong will” and speaks of the “strong-willed child” as an unfortunate problem and challenge. The implication surely is that if the child has a strong will, then it will be a little tougher to “break.” All of this implies that what parents in the revivalist tradition want is nice, compliant children.

Ironically, we observe that one aspect of the genius of the great saints in the biblical narrative and in the history of the church was the power of their will. Their strength of character was matched by their strength of will and by their capacity to engage God with this strength of will. Surely what young people need as they head into the cauldron of peer pressure in high school is strength of will. The will does indeed need to be challenged and directed, but having a strong will is not, in itself, a problem, and the heart of parenting is surely not to “break” this will.

3. Conversion Is Punctiliar

The emphasis on volition leads us to what is perhaps most noteworthy in the revivalist perspective on conversion. The language of salvation and volition (or surrender) is all wrapped up in the assumption that conversion is punctiliar. You can date it. You can mark it. You can know when you were saved, because you know the exact moment when you prayed what is typically called “the sinner’s prayer.” Preachers can count conversions, if they have more than one “decision,” and conversion is linked to this “decision.” Conversion is punctiliar, and salvation is punctiliar. They are tied to the moment in which one made the decision, said the prayer, and thereby “accepted Jesus into one’s heart.”

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Yet revivalism fails to appreciate the complexity of the human person and the complexity of religious experience. Despite the depth of the human predicament, despite the complex character of human emotions and pain, and despite the deep ambiguities of life, revivalism expects that a person can suddenly become a Christian. It also expects that this act can be recorded, measured, and counted. The assumed simplicity of conversion has often meant that one could identify how many people became Christians in this place at this time or over this period of time. Yet if religious experience is more ambiguous and complex, it means that this language of conversion does not enable us to speak accurately about what it means to become a Christian, what it looks like, what it feels like.

Without doubt, the greatest problem with the assumption that conversion is punctiliar is that it rarely ever is. Many people do not have a language with which to speak meaningfully about their own spiritual experience for the simple reason that they have not experienced conversion as a punctiliar event in their lives. Whether they are second-generation Christians (more on this below) or whether their journey to faith and of faith does not fit the mold, they do not know how to tell their story, how to give expression to their encounter with God’s grace. J. I. Packer states it well:

Conversion itself is a process. It can be spoken of as a single act of turning in the same way that consuming several dishes and drinks can be spoken of as a single act of dining, . . . and revivalism encourages us to think of a simple, all-embracing, momentary crisis as its standard form. But conversion . . . is best understood if viewed as a complex process that for adults ordinarily involves the following: thinking and re-thinking; doubting and overcoming doubts; soul-searching and self-admonition; struggle against feelings of guilt and shame; and concern as to what realistic following of Christ might mean.2

Most, if not all, conversions are actually a series of events—often a complex development over time, perhaps even several years. Yet for many Christian communities, there seems to be no way to speak meaningfully about believers’ experiences of coming to faith. Further, the proclivity toward thinking of conversion as singular and punctiliar has been matched by an assumption that the power of divine grace is evident precisely in the drama of the moment. There is a corresponding failure to appreciate the wonder of the Spirit, who often works slowly and incrementally in the natural course and context of our lives, bringing about God’s saving purposes.3

3. My work gives me opportunity to travel extensively, and I often sit down with pastors and theologians to reflect on the experience of conversion. While writing this book, I was in conversation with a Pakistani theologian who commented that he knows many Christian converts from the Muslim faith who have two conversion narratives—one that is an honest reflection of their
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In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a British study of conversion experiences came to the following remarkable conclusion: “The gradual process is the way in which the majority of people discover God and the average time taken is about four years: models of evangelism which can help people along the pathway are needed.”4 What we urgently need is a language of conversion that accounts for the process—often an extended process—by which a person comes to faith; only then can we develop an understanding of congregational life and evangelism that is congruent and consistent with the way that the Spirit is actually bringing women and men to faith in Christ.

4. Ambivalence about the Intellect, If Not Actual Anti-intellectualism

When we talk about “the scandal of the evangelical mind,”5 we are not speaking of the Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, or John Wesley, and most certainly we are not referring to the Reformers. The evangelical theological and spiritual heritage is actually known for its deep commitment to the life of the mind, the vital place of good scholarship in Christian mission and witness, and the importance of teaching, study, and learning for the health and well-being of the church. But we now live in an era of evangelicalism when the devoted scholar is viewed almost as an oxymoron. On one side are those who do not appreciate that the best scholarship is informed by prayer, and on the other are those who do not recognize that prayer and worship must be informed by good scholarship and that study, learning, and libraries are vital to the health and vitality of the church.

We have a generation of Christians who do not appreciate what it means to love God with one’s whole mind, who do not see that transformation comes through the renewal of the mind and that Christian mission is about taking “every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Contemporary worship now routinely features songs that foster a particular way of feeling good without attention to whether we are singing as intelligent people. The great hymns of the faith, which are substantial expressions that engage heart and mind, are now set aside for musical offerings that are trite and sentimental. As one pastor put it to me, our music is “happy clappy,” but it has little substance. We need to acknowledge the huge part that the reviverist heritage has played in this.

experience and another that describes a singular, punctiliar event, which they tell to satisfy the expectations of foreign missionaries!


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We should also acknowledge that this downplaying of the life of the mind has fostered a corresponding elevation of the place of emotions and affections in religious experience. Whenever we seek to incite a particular emotional response without reference to understanding and good doctrine, we are being manipulative, using emotion to achieve a particular end—whether a good feeling in the worship service or the making of a religious decision. Routinely, the heirs of revivalism have made no apology about using music to create a particular emotional landscape that in turn is viewed as the context in which significant religious choices can be made.

Evangelism must engage understanding, with a vigorous intellectual honesty. It needs to establish an intellectual beachhead from which a person, in becoming a Christian, can eventually come to a comprehensive reorientation of their thinking toward a Christian worldview. We need to turn from our propensity to think that evangelists are not scholars (or that scholars cannot be evangelists, for that matter). We need to turn from the inclination to be minimalists when it comes to what a person needs to know in order to come to faith. Without apology, we need to introduce inquirers to the magnificent spread of the biblical narrative—creation, fall, and redemption—and even, on a basic level, to the ancient creeds that anchor our understanding of who it is that we proclaim when we say the name “Jesus.”

This runs counter to a revivalist heritage that speaks of becoming a Christian as “accepting/receiving Jesus into your heart” and has led a generation of Christians to answer the question “You ask me how I know He lives?” with a thunderous “He lives within my heart!” I am not for a moment questioning the vital place of the heart or of Christian affections in authentic religious experience, and I am not suggesting that our faith rests on certain facts that amount to, as a popular 1970s book put it, “evidence that demands a verdict.” I am not calling for a cerebralism that fails to appreciate the significance of the arts and beauty in evangelism. However, evangelism that does not engage the mind in critical understanding of the truth is not truly Christian evangelism.

We need to rethink our language so that when we describe what it means to become a Christian, we do so in a way that clearly assumes and effectively describes a process or event in which there is a fundamental change of mind, a reorientation of one’s thinking, and a clarity of understanding by which a person comes to see and appreciate the wonder that truth sets us free. Ignorance is hell, not bliss, and truth has a power, simplicity, and glory that is compelling.

When we proclaim the gospel to those whose background and upbringing are secular humanist or post-Christian, who know little if anything about the Bible and its message or anything of the grand narrative of the people of Israel or the person of Jesus, then this grasping of the truth of the gospel will not and cannot come easily or quickly. We need to accept that it will often be a multistep process before a whole new way of thinking is approached.
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and ultimately engaged. This new vision of life’s meaning will take time to establish.

5. Conversion Is an Individual Transaction with God

The emphasis on volition has also meant stressing conversion as a largely personal and individual experience. We are indebted to the Puritans for their powerful and legitimate insistence that we all need to come to terms with our own spiritual destiny. The Puritans went even further, insisting that we all need to have our own conversion narrative; we need to be able to describe how we have come to faith. Yet there was a key difference from revivalism: the Puritans insisted that the church would mediate this experience, that one did not transact this whole matter entirely on one’s own.

Not so for the revivalists. They believed that you could become a Christian at a soccer stadium, on your own, in isolation from the faith community. It was a personal, interior, individual transaction. Even if someone prayed with you, it was your experience. It did not need to be linked to the church, and you did not need to become a member of the church to be a Christian. It was between you and God. Indeed, the revivalist insistence was that one could be “saved” without any reference to the church. For some, it was even a matter for celebration that this necessarily did not include the church. Robert E. Webber puts it well in his critique of modern evangelism: “Unwittingly, a wedge was driven between Christ and the church. In the worst-case scenario of modern evangelism, a person can be a Christian without an active life in the church. This approach to evangelism contributed to the privatization of faith, to a personal, me-oriented gospel that undercut the role of the church.”

The revivalist perspective failed to see how the church necessarily mediates the experience of conversion. And then, as a natural counterpart to this, by insisting that conversion is simple and individual, this perspective also downplayed that conversion leads to affiliation with a community of learners who experience transformation in community. If the genesis of the spiritual life is largely an individual transaction, then it follows that the rest of the spiritual life is transacted on one’s own, in one’s own space, on one’s own terms. If one can be “saved” without reference to the community, then one can presumably live the rest of one’s Christian life without reference to community. And while one might still attend church and be active in a Christian community, the individualism of one’s conversion fosters a sense that the church is nothing more than the sum of its parts, a collection of members, of individuals. Such a Christian lacks a covenant relationship with the community of faith, lacks a sense of vital dependence or, better, mutual dependence upon the community, lacks a sense


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of oneself maturing in the faith “as each part” does its work (Eph. 4:16). And the church is seen as a dispenser of religious experiences and opportunities that I can take or leave; hence, I can leave and affiliate with another congregation if I conclude that the other church will better “meet my needs.”

We must recover a deep appreciation of the communal character of all religious experience, beginning with conversion. When we begin with conversion as communal experience, then it will naturally follow that the Christian life is indeed an experience of God while we are in the company and fellowship of others. We love God even as we live in love with others; we meet God only insofar as we are at peace with others.

6. Ambivalence about the Sacraments, If Not Actual Anti-sacramentalism

Revivalism is marked by an emphasis on inner and subjective experience, with a particular focus on volition, on a personal decision that one makes “to receive Jesus into one's heart.” This results in an ambivalence about the mind and the intellectual dimensions of religious experience and an individualistic mindset about what it means to be in community, to be the church, and to have our experience of God mediated by the church. There is also an ambivalence about the sacramental actions of the church. In some cases, this goes beyond ambivalence to a discounting of the value and significance of these actions.

For many, baptism has become optional; indeed, it is not uncommon for the heirs of revivalism to conclude that baptism is not necessary. If conversion is viewed as a personal, individual, and subjective transaction between oneself and God—an interior act—then it only follows that the external, embodied, and communal action of baptism becomes, at most, secondary and incidental to the experience of conversion.

Baptism becomes separated from conversion, not incidentally but intentionally! Revivalism insists that Christians must not view baptism as having any redemptive value. In baptismal services, it is affirmed that the event has no particular value in itself but functions merely as a sign pointing toward the real conversion experience, which happens before baptism. Although some see no need for baptism, others accept the need for baptism but see it merely as a witness to their conversion. They may agree that they need to obey the clear mandate of Scripture, but they continue to insist that it is an individual transaction, something that can be done with a friend at the seaside or in a pool but not necessarily something to be mediated by the community of faith, the church.

However, the New Testament intimately links baptism and conversion. We are called to make disciples, and this call includes “baptizing them in the
name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). On the day of Pentecost, when the first apostles were asked what one should do in response to the preached Word, the answer was simple: “Repent, and be baptized . . . so that your sins may be forgiven” (Acts 2:38). Routinely one finds that the New Testament links the inner experience of repentance with the external and communal act of baptism.

One of the challenges of our day will be to restore the close biblical affinity between baptism and conversion. Many will resist this out of a fear of “baptismal regeneration,” the belief that the act of baptism itself is inherently redemptive, and they will counter that only God saves and thus that baptism cannot save. I concede this, but the New Testament will not allow us to tear conversion and baptism apart. We must find a way of speaking about baptism and conversion that affirms unequivocally that God is the savior but also that sacramental actions have a vital place in Christian experience. We need a better understanding of conversion, one affirming that as embodied souls our inner faith needs to be sacramentalized. And our language needs to reflect this by speaking of baptism as integral to, rather than subsequent to, conversion. By recovering the vital place of baptism in conversion, we will also recover the central and critical place of the Lord’s Supper in the ongoing life of the Christian.

7. Conversion Is Easy and Painless and Certainly Not Costly

For the revivalist generally, conversion is simple and easy: all you need to do is “accept Jesus into your heart.” It is easy and relatively pain free. Even though the words of the Gospels might urge an inquirer to count the cost, the emphasis in revivalism is that salvation is a gift, freely given, and consequently it comes easily.

Though salvation is certainly a gift, the language of the New Testament has a different ring to it. We read of Jesus telling a young man that he needs to sell everything, give his money to the poor, and then come and follow him. We read of the first disciples leaving everything to follow Jesus. We read of the foolish person who did not count the cost before venturing into a building project. The revivalist propensity toward making it easy and simple, uncomplicated and not costly, is part of a vision of evangelism and conversion that is oriented toward the afterlife: doing what is needed in order to have salvation in the next life, or as it is often put, doing what is needed in order to “go to heaven” after one dies.

Quite apart from a questionable cosmology and a view of heaven that does not incorporate the biblical vision of a deep continuity between this earth and the new heavens and the new earth, what is alarming is the failure to appreciate how conversion is as much about this life as the next. It is as
much about becoming who we are called to be now, women and men who through an experience of God’s saving grace are enabled to be now, in this life, thoroughly and redemptively engaged with our world.

This has resulted in a change in the way the term *disciple* is now used. The language of the New Testament assumes that the word disciple is a noun: through conversion, a person becomes a disciple, a follower of Christ. But in language inherited from revivalism, a person is first converted and then is “discipled”: the word is used as a verb. This minimalistic view no longer sees conversion as the foundation on which the rest of the Christian life will be built. It fails to see that the depth and breadth of our conversion is the basis on which the whole of our subsequent Christian life is lived. Surely we do not want such a weak foundation.

We urgently need a language of conversion that is deeply oriented toward transformation, maturity, and radical discipleship and that portrays conversion as a good beginning and solid foundation for what is yet to come. There is a deep continuity between evangelism and discipleship. They are not two distinct acts of the church; evangelism is integral to the call of the Scriptures to make disciples.

8. Evangelism Is a Technique

The revivalist heritage has left many contemporary Christians with the belief that conversions are the fruit of the right practices or techniques. By learning these techniques, one can become a “soul winner”; with the right methods, one could learn how to “lead people to Christ.” Some Christians have been taught simple formulas in a one-size-fits-all approach to evangelism: ask the right questions, lead people through a series of simple statements, guide them through a timely prayer, and one can state with confidence that these persons have become Christian believers. Reducing the procedure to a formula, the father of revivalism, Charles Finney, put it this way: it is all a matter of getting the approach right so that what follows is a “result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.”

Part of the wonder of the gospel is the reality that women and men can speak meaningfully about this good news to others and do so in a manner that provides an authentic witness to the reign of Christ (the kingdom). We can testify to the person of Christ as Lord of creation and as the hope for humanity, and we can speak personally of our own experience of God’s grace.

7. In Matt. 28, the word *disciple* is used as a transitive verb, “make disciples” as one word, but it is best translated as a noun; “disciple” is not so much something we do as something we are. We make disciples.

in Christ. God consistently uses the witness of Christians to enable others to know the gospel, and to know it in such a way that they can respond and become fellow believers. But the revivalists’ emphasis on technique, method, and formula has diminished our appreciation of the conversion experience as the fruit of the Spirit’s work in a person’s life. Our human participation in the process must honor the rhythms of the Spirit’s work. Evangelism involves discerning the work of the Spirit, learning to be attentive to how the Spirit is at work in this person at this time and in this place.

Further, it is never a matter of “winning souls.” There is only one who brings people to Christ: it is the Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. As demonstrated again and again by even cursory overviews of conversion narratives, some plant, others water, and still others harvest; yet only God “gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:7). Indeed, I would go so far as to say that in the hundreds of conversation narratives I have read, there is no example where only one person played a defining and determining role. Rather, multiple people played diverse roles in the process, and sometimes those who played a particularly crucial role did so unintentionally! No one person can conceivably be spoken of as the “soul-winner.” Conversion is purely and solely the work of the Spirit through multiple agents and avenues.

9. God Has No Grandchildren

From its Puritan roots, revivalism inherited the deep conviction that “God has no grandchildren.” This perspective rightly recognizes that becoming an adult means taking adult responsibility for one’s life and that one does not inherit faith but must choose for oneself to be a follower of Christ. No one, including our parents, can do this for us. But something important has been missed in this insistence. Those of the revivalist heritage often fail to appreciate the distinctive experience of second-generation Christians, those who have been raised within a faith community. Insistence on the individual act of choosing God is often expressed in a way that discounts that children are part of a covenant community of grace. The spiritual identity of the children of believing Christians is not the same as that of those whose parents are not Christian believers.

Some affirm the unique identity of believers’ children through infant baptism. Those who do not accept infant baptism must find a way to recognize and affirm that the spiritual experience of the children of believers will be different from that of those who are not raised in a Christian home. The language of revivalism has left us with a vacuum here because of its focus on conversion as punctiliar: a person either is or is not a Christian, in or out. We do not know how to speak meaningfully about those who are coming to faith. We lack a way to speak about the spiritual identity of children, especially in their
teen years, as they move through adolescence and are in the process (often over an extended period of time) of seeking to understand their own identity (differentiation) and to make sense of their parents’ faith.

We need a language that enables us to speak meaningfully about our children’s distinctive journey to faith in Christ, both in their younger years and as they become adolescents or young adults. This rethinking is needed regardless of whether our particular religious tradition baptizes infants or waits until they make their own faith confession.

10. No Meaningful Connection between Conversion, Baptism, and the Gift of the Spirit

Long before revivalism appeared on the scene, the church had already established a precedent of separating “conversion,” or the beginning of the Christian life, from the conscious appropriation of the gift of the Spirit. The Roman Church, for example, distinguished baptism (typically infant baptism) from confirmation (and thus chrismation, or the gift of the Spirit), which typically came later, in one’s teens. Revivalism reinforced this split. Within Reformed and Baptist circles, some maintained that there is no explicit reference to the gift of the Spirit at baptism since it can simply be taken for granted that a baptized person receives the gift of the Spirit. Those within Holiness and Pentecostal circles assumed that baptism (and thus conversion) was an experience of Christ but not necessarily of the Spirit. The Spirit’s work came later in what was commonly spoken of as a second experience of grace. The first was an experience of Christ, the second an experience of the Spirit.

Revivalism failed to provide the church with a vibrant understanding of the work of the Spirit in conversion, expressed if not actually experienced in baptism and then dynamically present in the life of the new convert. As we shall see, however, New Testament teaching and example insists on a close and intimate connection between conversion, baptism, and the gift of the Spirit.

Also, Christians who are heirs of revivalism do not typically have a helpful and doctrinally consistent way of speaking of the Spirit as a person (rather than as merely a force or “power”) in whom we are baptized and by whom we are filled. This kind of language makes many uncomfortable because it suggests that the gift of the Spirit can be manipulated or controlled by the church or by sacramental actions. Others, who are happy speaking about the gift of the Spirit, typically separate it from the experience of Christ and the cross reflected in the New Testament doctrine of baptism. Against these two extremes, we must affirm a close connection between conversion and the gift of the Spirit and find a language that consistently maintains what might be called the “independence” of God. God is not obligated by our actions; there is not a one-to-one connection between the work of God and the work of the Spirit.
of the church. Our language needs to reflect the language of Scripture and demonstrate—concretely and meaningfully—that in coming to Christ one receives the gift of the Spirit and that water baptism points to the baptism or filling of the Spirit, which is integral to conversion and baptism.

11. The Church’s Mission: Obtaining Conversions

One of the gravest weaknesses of revivalism is the lack of a strong and dynamic ecclesiology, which is evident in language and practice. For the revivalist, the church is reduced to nothing more than the collection of individuals who have decided to become Christians, and their common identity is reduced to a common purpose: to get other people to join the club.

The revivalist heritage has led many congregations to gauge their identity and accomplishments by how many conversions have happened in the church in the last year, as if it were the sole indicator of congregational health. This makes congregational life one-dimensional: everything is geared toward getting people to become Christians. Worship is oriented toward trying to persuade people to come to faith, and even such ministries as TESL (teaching English as a second language) are justified as a means to this particular end rather than as a service to those who need to learn the language of their new homeland.

The best corrective for this kind of thinking is for the church to be, unapologetically, the church: to be a community of persons who grow in love for Christ and for one another; who are maturing together in faith, hope, and love; who are engaged together in mission in the world as a community that serves as a sign pointing to Christ’s reign, seeking to make a difference for good through word and deed; and who are inviting others who need to be challenged with the call of Christ to join them and participate in this vision and work. In this way, we will not reduce or undercut our identity as the people of God by an exclusive focus on evangelism. Rather, as I will argue toward the end of this book, we will be a church that is passionate about Christ in our worship and passionate for the kingdom of God in our service. When integrated into this multidimensional picture, evangelism is simply our inviting women and men to join us as we worship Christ and serve the ascended Christ in the world.

The revivalist understanding of conversion assumes that religious experience can be measured, counted, and reported. Churches and ministries are then judged by whether or not they elicit conversions. Such congregations evaluate a program or worship service by one criterion: “Were there converts? If not, how can this program or activity be justified?” And at the end of the year, they want to know, “How many conversions did this church have?” They ask their missionaries after one year on the job, “Were there conversions?” If not, then support for the missionary may be put in question, or the missionary
is at least expected to rethink the chosen approaches to ministry in order to achieve better results, that is, more conversions.

But if the experience of coming to faith is not so clearly demarcated (i.e., is not punctiliar) and if everything that the church does is ultimately evangelism (i.e., we foster conversions not so much by being explicitly evangelistic but by simply being the church), then we need to learn how to be comfortable with ambiguity. Some, indeed many, people are on their way; they are seekers or inquirers. It may not be clear for quite some time whether they are “in” or “out.” In the meantime, we live with ambiguity, comfortably so, knowing that a whole range of religious experiences cannot be counted or measured or controlled. Effective preaching may or may not lead to an immediate response. Often, even with good preaching, there is no immediate evidence of transformation. It takes time. The work of the Spirit happens below the surface, hidden from human eyes, and we need a language of conversion that takes account of this. Transformation happens most fully and completely when the church seeks to be the church, allowing the Spirit to do the Spirit’s work in the Spirit’s time.

12. A Focus on the Afterlife with Minimal Reference to This World

In his high-priestly prayer in John 17, Jesus explicitly asks the Father not to remove his followers from the world but to “sanctify them” in “the world” (esp. vv. 17–19). This depiction of Christian discipleship has often been aptly spoken of as being “in, but not of, the world.” While Christian identity is rooted in and founded on Christ, our lives as Christians are lived out in the world. Yet the revivalist language emphasizes “getting saved” so that one can “go to heaven.” As a result, conversion is oriented toward the afterlife, toward one’s postdeath existence rather than toward transformation for life and work now, in the present world, in anticipation of what is coming.

The biblical notion of conversion, as we shall see, is about both this life and the life of the kingdom that is yet to come. It is about “eternity,” certainly, but also about our present existence, and we must recover the truth that conversion transforms women and men for life in the world: in the marketplace, in the arts, in every sphere and sector of society. The revivalist notion of conversion frequently leaves Christians assuming that the only activity that counts is religious activity, church work, especially religious activity that fosters more conversions, producing more people who leave the world and wait for the consummation of the kingdom.

Seeking a New Language of Conversion

When these twelve indicators of the language and influence of revivalism are put on the table, it is clear that what is urgently needed is a new way of
speaking about conversion, about how people come to faith. This will have a huge impact on how we speak about the church, about what it means to be a community of faith, and it will have a substantial impact on how we speak and think about evangelism. We urgently need a language of conversion that is more congruent with the New Testament and the actual experience of those who are becoming Christians.

We need to be able to speak with simplicity and frankness about how a person can come to faith in Christ, but we also need to be able to live with the complexity of it all, with the ambiguity of religious experience, with the fact that many are “on the way” and that their coming to faith may take months or even years. The church needs to be a place where this transitional status is okay, a safe place for those who have no previous Christian identity or orientation as well as for those who have been raised in the church and who are, through the grace of God, coming to an adult affirmation of their faith.

We must recognize that the language of revivalism is deeply embedded in the psyche of North American evangelicals and that it will take persistence and intentionality to begin speaking differently, to embrace a new language of conversion. This new language of conversion will reflect several dynamic tensions:

1. It will integrate heart and mind, following the wisdom of such giants as John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards, who rightly speak of religious affections as the heart of Christian experience but also maintain that these affections are guided by intellect and understanding. It will refuse to pit heart and mind against each other.

2. It will integrate body and soul, refusing to polarize them and refusing to accept a piety or spirituality that is purely interior, subjective, and expressive. It will without apology assert that if conversion is not embodied, it is not truly Christian. It will affirm the priority of the interior but also the vital place of baptism in conversion, without succumbing to baptismal regeneration, affirming subjectivity and interiority along with embodiment and sacramentality.

3. It will affirm the individual in community, that conversion is not merely an individual transaction but an experience that makes evident that we do not know God in isolation from the community of faith.

4. It will affirm human agency as vitally involved in our choices, our willingness to believe, our act of the will to believe, accept, and follow. Yet it will view this human agency within the context of divine initiative and insist that salvation is the work of God, that this work is the mysterious outworking of the Spirit’s ministry, and that conversion is a response to the saving initiative of God rather than God’s “saving” coming in response to human initiative.
5. It will sustain the dynamic tension between arrival and beginning. Through conversion we come home, we find ourselves and we find God, and we know the salvation of God (we are saved), but this “arrival” is a point of departure for the rest of the Christian life. Conversion is both arrival and departure simultaneously, and our new language of conversion must not only assure us that we are the children of God but also remind us that the journey has just begun, as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, looking forward to the day of our salvation.

6. It will reflect the New Testament’s assumption that in Christ we are baptized in and by the Spirit and that the very goal and purpose of baptism is that we would know this grace. It will affirm the need to speak of this and even formalize it in our rites and acts of Christian initiation, while also affirming the sovereignty and priority of God.

7. It will help us make sense of the experience of our children and thus the children of church, fostering a helpful understanding and tension: the children of believers must affirm the faith for themselves but they are also raised in, and formed in, the faith and therefore do not need to be “evangelized.”

8. It will enable us to turn from disengagement to engagement with the world, to being in but not of the world. It will correct the language of revivalism, which assumes that the experience of conversion is about the afterlife and about abandoning this world and hoping for a world to come. Instead, it will empower us to embrace our vocation to be in the world as agents of peace and justice while asserting the profound discontinuity between “the world” and God’s kingdom.

How will we obtain and sustain such a dynamic language of conversion that embraces so many tensions and seeming contradictions—heart vs. mind, body vs. soul, individual vs. community, arrival vs. departure, human agency vs. divine initiative, in but not of the world—without losing either side of the balance?

First, it will come through a careful and thorough reading of the New Testament text, in which, as much as we are able, we allow the text to speak for itself, striving to read without imposing our revivalist heritage or other theological mindset. We cannot read with pure objectivity, but we can learn to read the Bible plainly and to let the language and thought forms of the New Testament increasingly shape the way in which we speak of conversion and the whole of the spiritual life. In the chapters that follow, I will give particular

9. I believe that many so-called seeker-sensitive approaches to congregational life have sought to correct revivalism by affirming links and connections to the world (holding worship services in movie theaters, for example) but in so doing have failed to demonstrate adequately the discontinuities between the world and the inbreaking of the reign of Christ.
focus to the Letter to the Ephesians and the book of Acts. Ephesians provides the theological contours for conversion; Acts describes the experience.

Second, we will need to recover our theological and spiritual heritage, appreciating the wisdom that comes from the tradition. For evangelicals, this will mean giving particular attention to the wisdom and insights arising from the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth century. This will soften some of the false polarizations that have come through the language of revivalism. When we reflect on our own heritage, it is vital that we do so in dialogue with Christians from other traditions—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and others—so that they can challenge our language, our categories, and our assumptions. We can be evangelical without being sectarian. We must read the Bible as those who are attentive to our past, our heritage, but who are also in conversation with Christians of other traditions.

Third, the language of conversion is necessarily informed by experience—the experience of the church and particularly the experience of those who come to faith in Christ. In other words, we attend to conversion narratives and recognize that these are a witness to the way in which the Spirit brings people into a transforming encounter with Christ. We will be looking at the experience of the early church, as described in the book of Acts; but we will also look at conversion narratives from subsequent chapters in the history of the church. These narratives illumine the biblical text for us and broaden our appreciation of the nature of conversion. In this way, our theology of conversion will be informed by the biblical text, the church’s tradition, and the experience of those who come to faith, recognizing in this experience a witness to the work of the Spirit.