



Conversion: How God Creates a People

Michael Lawrence

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Does what a church believes about how people become Christians change how we do evangelism? In this concise book, Michael Lawrence explains the doctrine of conversion and helps us consider the relationship between what we believe about how people are saved and our approach to sharing the gospel in the context of the local church. Readers of this book will understand how the local church should participate in the conversion process through ordinary means, such as biblical preaching and intentional relationships.

Conversion: How God Creates a People Details

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Author : Michael Lawrence

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From Reader Review Conversion: How God Creates a People for online ebook

Ben Robin says

This just might be the best book in this series. Lawrence beautifully weaves together all the threads of local church theology and practice in a typical 9Marks fashion. I highly recommend this excellent book on such an important and relevant topic!

Josh says

Great biblical overview of conversion

Jon Pentecost says

The need to be born again is at the heart of Jesus' teaching, and yet so often we fail to seriously consider how this should impact the way we engage with fellow Christians and the church.

Lawrence helpfully walks us through the need for conversion, the nature of conversion, what a converted person should look like in ways that will help any believer grow in their faith. His concluding chapters, on charity towards those professing faith imperfectly, and on the implications of this for our life and practice as a church are worth the price of the book on their own.

This brief book is full of challenging exhortations, and beautiful pictures of what a community of converted, born-again followers of Jesus looks like.

Jeremiah von Kühn says

Agree with David Wells -- "Down-to-earth, clear, practical, straight shooting, biblically cogent treatment of the nature and necessity of conversion. This is an excellent book." Love how he shows how our theology of conversion drives (or ought to drive) practice. Especially enjoyed chapter 6 (Summon, don't sell: implications for our evangelism) and chapter 8 (Charitable, not chary: the danger of an overly pure church). Chapter 8 was refreshing, especially coming from 9Marks, as some of their guys can, at times, give the impression that they expect a completely pure church now.

Joshua Lister says

This rating is really closer to a 2.5. Parts of this book were really good and other parts really bad. Chapter 2, chapter 6, and the conclusion are particularly good sections. Here, Lawrence makes some helpful distinctions along with some shrewd observations about the modern evangelical climate.

Although, some passages were mixed up. Lawrence has no category for covenantal Christians who are either apostate or unregenerate. He consequently struggles to resolve certain tensions that arise in his writing. This is a category of Christians that scripture explicitly acknowledges and he should address.

Lastly, there is a brief section in chapter 7 warning against assuring children of their salvation too early but this is terribly misguided. God promises salvation to our children and children understand childlike faith. They need assurance before they need to meet standards for exhibiting maturity. Overall the book is a mishmash.

Becky says

First sentence from chapter one: In the introduction, I mentioned my friend who was concerned that his well-mannered adult children weren't really Christians. You might say they were nice, but not new—not new creations. His experience raises questions about the doctrine of conversion, as well as what that doctrine should look like in the life of a church. It's crucial to get both our doctrine and our practices right. Churches should believe that God makes people radically new, not just nice, through conversion. But they should be able not only to write this out on paper, but also to live it out. What does that look like? In two of the most important passages in Scripture for understanding conversion, both the prophet Ezekiel and Jesus help us answer that question.

Premise/plot: Michael Lawrence's newest book is on the doctrine of conversion. But it's not dry theology--far from it. As he argues in his book, our doctrine of conversion has practical implications. Our doctrine of conversion influences not only how we live our lives daily in our families but also communally in our churches and neighborhoods. Lawrence's main point--one of them anyway--is that Christians can have the "right" the "proper" definition of conversion in their minds, as part of their creed. BUT if this doctrine isn't lived out, isn't experienced, doesn't change our relationships then something is very wrong. Doctrines are to be applied. And our doctrine of conversion is essential for helping the church do church.

Too often our confessional theology says one thing, while our practical theology says something else. We say that regeneration makes us new creatures in Christ, but then we teach our kids a moralism that atheists could duplicate. We say that Christianity is about a trusting relationship with Jesus, but then we treat it like checking a box on a decision card. We say that only the Holy Spirit transfers a person from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, but then we employ the marketing tools used for getting someone to switch brands of toothpaste. Again and again, what we claim in our doctrinal statements about conversion doesn't match what our churches practice or their ministry models. So it shouldn't surprise us that our kids end up being something less than Christian.

I want to think about the difference that should make in the life of the church—from the way we go about evangelism, to our membership and discipleship practices, to the way we think about the church as a whole. In other words, this is a book of doctrine, and this is a book of practice. It is a book about conversion, and it is a book about the church. After all, God creates a people through conversion. Show me someone's doctrine of conversion, and I can tell you a lot about his church.

Good theology is intensely practical, and if it's not, then it isn't worth the name.

Essentially in his book, Lawrence does two things. First, he unpacks the doctrine of conversion. He explains what it is and what it isn't. Being a new creation, being born again, isn't becoming nicer or more moral. Second, he argues that a rightly held doctrine should be rightly applied in our churches, in our homes, in our neighborhoods. Our doctrine of conversion, of regeneration, is closely related to our doctrine of evangelism and missions. And if we hold contradictory doctrines, there's a big problem that we need to address and that we ultimately need to change!

These days, there are lots of different kinds of nice. There's the polite but detached tolerance of "live and let live" nice. There's the socially conscious and politically engaged nice. There's religious nice in many different denominational and faith-community forms. There's "spiritual but not religious" nice. There's even what's known in my town as "Portland nice," a sort of nonconfrontational, "let's not make anyone feel uncomfortable, even though we're silently judging and dismissing you in our minds" nice. But for all the different kinds of nice, the appeal of nice hasn't changed much in the last two thousand years. To be a nice person, a good person, a person who's becoming a better person, is to feel good about yourself. It's that appeal of moral self-commendation that binds our modern variations together into a common religious program that Nicodemus would have recognized (see Luke 10:25–29). Nice allows you to commend yourself to others, and maybe even to God. Nice gives you the means of self-justification and the ability to vindicate your life to whoever is asking. That's appealing.

The appeal of nice is always based on three ideas: an optimistic view of human beings, a domesticated view of God, and a view of religion as a means of moral self-reform.

No churches ever explicitly teach the religion of nice. In fact, they typically teach the exact opposite. But those same churches are filled with people who believe that God will accept them based on how good they've been. I've heard it on too many living rooms couches and nursing home beds. Not perfect—no one ever says that—but good enough.

What makes the moralistic program of nice difficult to spot in our evangelical churches is that it's almost never taught explicitly. Instead, it's the natural condition of our unregenerate selves. It follows us into the church like walking inside with the aroma of the outdoors: it's hard to smell on yourself because you are so accustomed to it.

How can we tell we have a problem applying our doctrine of conversion in our churches?

We condemn the world's sin more than our own.

We put sins in a hierarchy, and tolerate some sins (especially our own) more than others.

In church, we sing songs and pray prayers of praise, not songs and prayers of confession.

We describe our own sins as “mistakes.”

We use Bible stories to teach children to be good rather than to point them to a Savior: “Be like David” not “You need a new and better David, who is Christ.”

So many of us learned the message of nice in churches that introduced us to a Jesus who promised to improve us, not a Jesus who calls his followers to die to themselves; these churches taught us to be nice without making sure we were new. I fear this is why so many of my friends’ children have walked away from Christianity. They haven’t given up on nice. They’ve simply discovered that they don’t need Jesus to be nice.

A radical change must occur in us. But the word that the Bible never uses to describe what Jesus is talking about is reformation. You might reform a church, but not a dead heart. The personal change that Jesus says we need goes much deeper; it reaches down to our very nature. The necessity of being born again flows from five biblical truths: the inability of human beings, the holiness of God, the grace of the gospel, the power of God’s Spirit, and the creation of a people.

When churches look more like the world than Christ, we effectively preach a different gospel. More than likely it will be the gospel of nice.

It’s popular to think of God’s judgment of sinners in hell as God giving us what we ask for—life without God. It’s true that hell is the absence of God’s love. But hell is also the presence of God in his justice, measuring out to sin what it deserves. And it is this, the wrath of God, from which we must be saved. Since God is good, he will pay back injustice and sin what it deserves. And we all have sinned. This has enormous implications for our preaching. For the gospel to make sense, we must preach the justice and wrath of God. Too easily, however, churches downplay these basic truths and so change the gospel. It’s hard to talk about hell and God’s wrath. It is much easier to talk about being saved from purposeless lives, low self-esteem, or unhappiness. So we treat Jesus as the solution to a subjective, internal problem. Come to Jesus; he’ll give you purpose and meaning. The trouble is, subjective problems can be solved through subjective solutions. I might choose Jesus to gain a sense of purpose, but my friend down the street sincerely chooses a career. Who’s to say which is better? It’s all subjective. When we fail to preach the justice of God and downplay his wrath, we are talking about some other gospel. We have changed it from an objective rescue to a subjective path to personal fulfillment.

Grace is what saves. Faith is the instrument. Which means: we’re not saved by faith. We’re saved by grace, and faith receives that grace. Faith trusts that gift. What happens when we think

faith saves us? Sincerity becomes paramount. We begin to think of faith as a single act—a prayer prayed, a decision made, a card signed, a hand raised—rather than as a whole-life orientation. The trouble is, we can never be sure if we were sincere enough. So insecurity follows, and a culture of rededication develops. Anxious children pray “the prayer” over and over. Youth rededicate themselves at every youth retreat. Adults do the same. All are hoping that this time the expression of faith will be sincere enough.

The language of God’s love is the language of God’s choice, his election. God chooses to love. He doesn’t have to love us. In fact, by all rights, he shouldn’t love us. But he does. God’s love for us isn’t on a whim. If we turn this around, so that God loves us because we chose and love him, Christianity becomes a religion of selfsalvation. The message is that God is obligated to save us because of our love, our choice, our sincerity. Our faith, not his love, becomes the deciding factor. And we introduce pride into the heart and soul of our churches. The gospel has been turned on its head.

To become a Christian, you must repent of your sins. The basic idea of repentance is to turn.

We were created to worship, and if we won’t worship God, we’ll worship something else. Calling people to repentance, then, means calling for a reorientation of worship. So who or what are we worshiping rather than God? What compels our time and energy, our spending and our leisure? What makes us angry? What gives us hope and comfort? What are our aspirations for our children? Idols make lots of promises, even though they can’t keep them.

Repenting means exchanging our idols for God. Before it’s a change in behavior, it must be a change in worship. How different that is from how we often think of repentance. Too often we treat repentance as a call to clean up our lives. We do good to make up for the bad. We try to even the scale, or even push it back to the positive side. Sometimes we talk about repentance as if it were a really serious, religious New Year’s resolution.

Repentance is not a feeling. Repentance is being convicted by the Holy Spirit of the sinfulness of our sin—not the badness of our deeds but the treachery of our hearts toward God. Repentance means hating what we formerly loved and served—our idols—and turning away from them. Repentance means turning to love God, whom we formerly hated, and serving him instead. It’s a new deepest loyalty of the heart.

If repentance really is a change of worship, then our churches must not pressure people to make hasty, illconsidered “decisions” for Jesus, and then offer them quick assurance. Instead, we must call people to repent. When we separate repentance from conversion, either because we

think it can come later or we fear scaring people off, we reduce conversion to bad feelings or moral resolve. Worse, we risk assuring a “convert” that he is right with God when in fact he is not. It’s almost like giving someone a vaccine against the gospel.

What does a false convert look like?

Often, it is someone who
is excited about heaven, but bored by Christians and the local church;
thinks heaven will be great, whether God is there or not;
likes Jesus, but didn’t sign up for the rest—obedience, holiness, discipleship, suffering;
can’t tell the difference between obedience motivated by love and legalism;
is bothered by other people’s sins more than his or her own;
holds grace cheap and his own comfort costly.

To become a Christian is to take up a life of repentance. Jesus described it as taking up our cross and following him. It begins at a point in time, but it continues in a life of service and love to God. If repentance is one side of coin, the other side is belief or faith. To become a Christian, you must not only repent, you must also believe the good news about Jesus.

Real faith leans, and depends, and follows, and works.

Lawrence's book is relevant; it is packed with truth that we all need to hear. Whether we've ever thought much about conversion or not. To the old, to the young, we could all use some truth.

My thoughts: I thought this was a wonderful refresher. I would definitely recommend this one. I remember vividly when I first learned of the (reformed) doctrine of conversion. It was life-changing, life-giving. It was one of those THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING moments. This book was a great reminder of that initial excitement, the embrace of grace.

Matt Chapman says

Really excellent!

Courtney Huskisson says

These bite-sized books from the 9Marks group are packed with great theology and are such a value to the church. This book specifically put words to experiences and observations I've had in the church but didn't organize in such a way.

I grew up in the 'decision culture' of Christianity, where all you had to do was make one decision, pray one prayer, and that's it! Your ticket is punched. You've got a free pass to heaven. Meanwhile, I would come across passages in the Scripture where Jesus will say 'I never knew you' to those who did lots of good works for him. I was haunted by this fact. What if a decision was not enough?

In this small book, Lawrence lays out a 'this, not that' format of what conversation truly is. It's not a decision, it's a disciple who counts the cost, has a new master who gives them a new heart and new loves. It's more than just something to put a morally righteous stamp on your life, but a new and righteous life with new motivations as well as being a part of a new people. In all of his statements on conversion, Lawrence wraps it all into the bigger vision of the church. The Lord doesn't just create a new person, but a new people. To be grafted into the body of Christ, means membership in a literal body. I appreciated how Lawrence wrapped the theology of conversion into the whole of Christian life, it affects everything.

As someone who works with youth in my church, this has sparked a lot of thought in me as to how I communicate the gospel to our students. Am I calling them to count the cost, to live for a new master, or am I just trying to get them to a decision. Discipleship is a lifelong journey.

This book is highly recommended for any Christian, vocational church leader or not.

Mike says

“Conversion: How God Creates a People”, by Dr. Michael Lawrence, pastor of Hinson Baptist Church in Portland, Oregon, is one book in the 9Marks series of “Building Healthy Churches”.

I selected to review this book because I’m also reading another book about conversion at the time, and I know these series of books are relatively short, quick reads. That is true of this book, but it is packed full of hard-hitting truth in relatively a brief introduction, 8 chapters, and conclusion.

As the title suggests, the book covers a biblical understanding of true conversion. I cannot say enough good about this book, as it punches square in the nose many of the problems seen in the church related to false conversions.

Chapter 1: “New, Not Nice” explains that we are made altogether “new”, not merely functionally “nice” upon our conversion. Converts must be completely regenerated (something God does), and not merely reformed better versions of our past selves. Merely being nice is not the same thing as being right with God.

Chapter 2: “Saved, Not Sincere” addresses the issue of our not being saved by sincerity or intense emotions, but only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Anything else makes salvation about us rather than about God’s glory.

Chapter 3: “Disciples, Not Decisions” focuses on a biblical understanding of repentance. Faith requires churches to make disciples, not decisions.

Chapter 4: “Holy, Not Healed” (my favorite) deals hard blows to the false “therapeutic gospel”, which is no gospel at all. This false gospel is prevalent in the church today, and is so common that it goes largely unrecognizable as being false. The therapeutic gospel suggests Jesus came to give you a better marriage, a more successful career, to make you a better parent, etc. While truly following Jesus may lead to those

results, there is no guarantee any or all will happen. This gospel is me-centered, rather than God-centered. Instead, the true gospel calls us to the lordship of Christ, setting us apart to a new master and a new love.

Chapter 5: “Distinct, Not Designed” discusses that no action, word, or deed other than our love for fellow Christians will the world know the church is distinctly different from the world. And when the world sees our love for those who dislike us, then it will see the church is radically different.

Chapter 6: “Summon, Don’t Sell” The call to evangelize calls us to proclaim the gospel plainly, honestly, urgently, and confidently. Our role is not to “seal the deal”, for that is God’s doing. Don’t sugar-coat or soften the challenges the gospel declares.

Chapter 7: “Assess Before You Assure” deals with difficulty of balancing false assurances of genuine faith in others, and discerning true faith. Faith is a living, active hope and trust that produces a pattern of growth. Give others the benefit of the doubt, and encourage them when you see evidences of grace. At the same time, be careful about giving false assurance.

Chapter 8: “Charitable, Not Chary” deals with the difficulty of sinners within the church. The church is not for those who have already arrived in heaven, but for those whose longings are for heaven. The church calls the immature, the imperfect, the weak, the hurt, and the scandalous to her – not to remain there, but to grow in her. Note: “chary” means “reluctance to do something”.

Rating: I give “Conversion” 5 out of 5 stars. It is truly a must-read, and would be an excellent read for new converts, as it reminds us to always check ourselves that we are in the faith.

Disclaimer: I received this book free of charge free of charge from Crossway Publishers in exchange for my unbiased review of it. All opinions are mine, and I was not forced to provide a positive review.

Joshua Reichard says

Over and over again 9Marks hits the nail on the head! This book on conversion will transform the way you view the churches role in conversion, the individuals role in conversation, and God’s role in conversation. Let me bless you with a few quotes and thoughts from this fantastic book. First, conversation is the turning from worshipping something to worship in God. “I don’t know I am alive because I have a birth certificate. I know I am alive because I am breathing.” That quote is in reference to salvation. We should not look back to a past word or prayer but look at the present life we are living. Lastly God loves us because.

Brian Parks says

This was a very good, short survey and explanation of the doctrine of conversion and how it should be understood as impacting not only individuals but also the life and health of the local church. Lawrence does a good job explaining it in simple terms. This book would help any pastor or lay person grow in their faith and discernment. One minor quibble is that the book assumed that the reader might be coming at the issue from a evangelical fundamentalist point of view. (He's probably right in that assumption). Still I would have liked to see him rebut a range of misconceptions about conversion.

International take: I pastor an international church outside N. America. I might give this book 3 stars for an international context given that the illustrations are pretty American-centric. Internationals might have a harder time grasping the ideas related to the illustrations. The author does use more complex vocabulary at points as well.

Mark Donald says

Biblical conversion is an incredibly important doctrine, which is massively misunderstood, and essential to faithful evangelistic efforts and church life. Michael Lawrence helps clarify a lot of misunderstandings which have plagued churches (perhaps especially in the West). In addition to helping clarify the biblical teaching on being born again, Michael Lawrence helps connect a right understanding of conversion with evangelistic methods and church membership practices. This little book has given me a lot to think about and will continue to be a resource for me in the future as I seek to better apply the doctrine to my ministry in my local church.

Highly recommended - any Christian would be blessed by reading this book, to better understand God's work in their own transformation and the lives of those they are seeking to share the good news with. Also, it is very accessible which makes it a great resource for using with young people, new Christians, and anyone who might be intimidated by the idea of "studying theology".

Will Pareja says

If you, fellow church members or leaders are confused about the response to the Gospel (conversion), then this brief book will help you.

For some it will be properly disturbing. And hopefully life saving.

Get a few copies and give them out to people who need to rethink their easy- believism or decisionism ways. Or, give them to people who could bone up on an already good theology of saving faith and assurance.

"Real repentance is being convicted by the Holy Spirit of the sinfulness of our sin— not the badness of our deeds but the treachery of our hearts toward God."

The church isn't a communion "vending machine" (p. 106).

Sam Knecht says

Conversion is often misunderstood, assumed, or ignored. Yet it is the one and only means by which God makes a people for himself, by which Christ builds his church. Not grasping a biblical understanding of conversion can lead churches to counterintuitive--even harmful--practices.

This book from Michael Lawrence is full of both hard, solid doctrine and soft, messy pastoral application. A wide range of Christians can glean benefits from these 130 pages.

Tom Depew says

Excellent book! Highly recommend
