



**REAL  
CHANGE:  
CONVERSION**



*Real Change: Conversion*

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# INTRODUCTION

What does the local church mean to you?

Maybe you love your church. You love the people. You love the preaching, the singing. You can't wait to show up on Sunday, and you cherish fellowship with other church members throughout the week.

Maybe the church is just a place you show up to a couple times a month. You sneak in late, duck out early.

We at 9Marks are convinced that the local church is God's plan for displaying his glory to the nations. And we want to help you catch and live out that vision, together with your whole church.

The 9Marks Healthy Church Study Guides are a series of six- or seven-week studies on each of the "nine marks of a healthy church" plus one introductory study. These nine marks are the core convictions of our ministry. To provide a quick introduction to them, we've included a chapter from Mark Dever's book *What Is a Healthy Church?* with each study. We don't claim that these nine marks are the most important things about the church or the only important things about the church. But we do believe that they are biblical and therefore are helpful for churches.

So, in these studies, we're going to work through the biblical foundations and practical applications of each one. The ten studies are:

- *Built upon the Rock: The Church* (the introductory study)
- *Hearing God's Word: Expositional Preaching*
- *The Whole Truth about God: Biblical Theology*
- *God's Good News: The Gospel*
- *Real Change: Conversion*
- *Reaching the Lost: Evangelism*
- *Committing to One Another: Church Membership*

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- *Guarding One Another: Church Discipline*
- *Growing One Another: Discipleship in the Church*
- *Leading One Another: Church Leadership*

Each session of these studies takes a close look at one or more passages of Scripture and considers how it applies to the life of the whole church. So, we hope that these studies are equally appropriate for Sunday school, small groups, and other contexts where a group of anywhere from two to two-hundred people can come together and discuss God's Word.

These studies are mainly driven by observation, interpretation, and application questions, so get ready to speak up! We also hope that these studies provide opportunities for people to reflect together on their experiences in the church, whatever those experiences may be.

Do you think that people can change? I'm not talking about breaking a few bad habits or transforming from nerd to style icon. I mean real change. Change of the heart. Change of the whole person. Change that's deep and lasting.

In one sense, the Bible says that people cannot change. We are sinners by nature. Our hearts are corrupt and we can't make ourselves un-sinful, un-corrupt. Can a blind man make himself see? Can a dead man make himself alive? Those are the images Scripture uses to describe who we are by nature.

But that's not the whole story. The Bible tells us that God has the power to change. God can give sight to the blind. God can raise the dead. God can take out our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh. God can change us in ways that are deep and lasting.

The fundamental change the Bible talks about, and the change which sets in motion a whole life of Godward change, is conversion. Conversion is when God raises us from the dead, gives us eyes to see his glory, and grants us to turn from our sin and trust in Christ. Conversion may be a bad word to some in our culture, but it's a glorious, hope-giving biblical truth.

In this study we're going to look at the questions:

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- Do we need to change?
- Is change possible?
- What is the change we need?
- How does this change happen?
- What are the fruits of this change?
- What does this change mean for the life of the church?

There is great hope in God's power to change. Let's explore that hope together.





# AN IMPORTANT MARK OF A HEALTHY CHURCH: A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF CONVERSION

BY MARK DEVER

*(Originally published as chapter 8 of What Is a Healthy Church?)*

At my church's first meeting back in 1878, the church adopted a statement of faith. It was a strengthened version of the 1833 New Hampshire Confession of Faith. The old language may be a bit tough, but try to press through it. Article VIII of this statement reads,

We believe that Repentance and Faith are sacred duties, and also inseparable graces, wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God; whereby being deeply convinced of our guilt, danger, and helplessness, and of the way of salvation by Christ, we turn to God with unfeigned contrition, confession, and supplication for mercy; at the same time heartily receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as our Prophet, Priest, and King, and relying on him alone as the only and all-sufficient Saviour.

Not many people speak or write like this anymore. Yet the biblical truths here haven't changed. A healthy church is marked by a biblical understanding of conversion.

## **OUR WORK**

The statement begins with the biblical call to repentance and faith. As Jesus commanded at the beginning of his ministry, "Repent and

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believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15 NIV). In the simplest terms, conversion equals repentance and faith.

As the confession continues, it provides a further description of what repentance and faith look like. It says we “turn” to God from our sin, we “receive” Christ, and we “rely” on him alone as the all-sufficient Savior. The New Testament is filled with pictures of sinners leaving their sin, receiving Christ, and relying upon him. Think of Levi the tax collector leaving his trade to follow Christ. Or the woman at the well. Or the Roman centurion. Or Peter, James, and John. Or Saul, the persecutor of Christians, turned Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. The list is long. Each of them turns, trusts, and follows. That’s conversion.

It’s not reciting a creed. It’s not saying a prayer. It’s not a conversation. It’s not becoming a Westerner. It’s not reaching a certain age, attending a class, or passing through some other rite of adulthood. It’s not a journey, everyone strewn along the path at different points. Rather, conversion is turning with our whole lives from self-justification to Christ’s justification, from self-rule to God’s rule, from idol worship to God worship.

## CONVERSION IS GOD’S WORK IN US

Yet notice what this statement also says about our conversion. We turn because we are “deeply convinced of our guilt, danger and helplessness, and of the way of salvation by Christ.” How does this happen? Who convinces us? It is “wrought in our souls by the regenerating Spirit of God.” The statement cites two Scriptures to support this idea:

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:18 NIV)

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. (Eph. 2:8 NIV)

If we understand our conversion as something we have done, apart from what God first does in us, then we misunderstand it.

Conversion certainly includes our action, as we've discussed. Yet conversion is much more than that. Scripture teaches that we must have our hearts replaced, our minds transformed, and our spirits given life. We can't do any of this. The change every human needs is so radical, so much at our very root, that only God can do it. He created us the first time. So he must make us new creations. He was responsible for our natural birth. So he must give us a new birth. We need God to convert us.

The nineteenth-century preacher Roland Hill once told a story of how a drunken man came up to him and said, "I am one of your converts, Mr. Hill." "I daresay you are," replied that shrewd and sensible preacher; "but you are none of the Lord's, or you would not be drunk."

### **BAD FRUIT AND GOOD**

When a church misunderstands the Bible's teaching on conversion, it may well become filled with people who made sincere pronouncements at one point in their lives but who have not experienced the radical change the Bible presents as conversion.

True conversion may or may not involve an emotionally heated experience. However, it will evidence itself in its fruit. Do lives give evidence of change—putting off the old and putting on the new? Are members interested in waging war against their sin, even if they continue to stumble? Do they show a new interest in enjoying fellowship with Christians and perhaps new motives in spending time with non-Christians? Are they beginning to respond to trials and challenges differently from how they did as non-Christians?

A right understanding of conversion will show up not only in the sermons, but in a church's requirements for baptism and the Lord's Supper. Care will be exercised. Pastors will not be pressured to baptize people hastily and without examination.

It will show up in the church's expectations for membership. Admittance is not immediate. Perhaps a membership class is offered. A testimony is requested, as well as an explanation of the gospel from the prospective member.

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It will show up in the church's unwillingness to view known sin lightly. Accountability, encouragement, and the occasional rebuke are ordinary, not extraordinary. Church discipline is practiced.

Understanding the Bible's presentation of conversion is one of the important marks of a healthy church.



# WEEK 1

## DO WE NEED TO CHANGE?

### GETTING STARTED

I like to think that I'm open to criticism, but when my wife actually offers some constructive feedback I get defensive and touchy. What's going on here?

1. It seems that many people get offended if someone even suggests that they need to change. What are some reasons why people get offended at this?
2. Do you get upset when someone suggests you need to change? If so, why? What does that show about your heart?

### MAIN IDEA

All people desperately need to change because by nature we are alienated from God, rebellious toward God, and subject to the wrath of God.

### DIGGING IN

Regardless of the fact that many people would oppose this idea, the Bible teaches that all human beings are in need of fundamental change.

Consider what Paul says about humanity in Romans chapter 1:

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. <sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they

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became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

<sup>26</sup> For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; <sup>27</sup> and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

<sup>28</sup> And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. <sup>29</sup> They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup> Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (1:18–32)

1. *Who is Paul talking about in these verses?*
2. *What are all the things that Paul says people do in this passage? List them all below. Does anything Paul says strike you, surprise you, or raise questions for you?*
3. *What is God's attitude toward humanity as described in this passage?*
4. *What does Paul say can be known about God (vv. 19–20)? How are these things made known (v. 20)?*
5. *How should we respond to this knowledge (v. 21)?*
6. *What have people done to the truth about God (See vv. 18, 21, 22, 23)?*

7. *What has happened to our minds and hearts as a result? (See v. 28.)*
8. *How would you summarize this passage's teaching about human nature and God's attitude toward humanity as a whole?*
9. *In light of this passage, how would you respond to someone who said that human beings are fundamentally good?*
10. *What evidence do you see in the world that this passage's teaching is true?*
11. *Why do you think it's important for us as Christians to clearly proclaim that people are in need of radical change? What would happen if we muted this part of the Christian message?*
12. *What are some ways that the local church as a whole can clearly communicate this need for change?*

As Christians, we rejoice that this bad news about humanity is not the end of the story. We know that because God is good, he will punish sin. This is a fearful prospect since, as we've seen, all humans are rebels against God. Yet we also know that because God is merciful, he sent Jesus Christ into the world to live the perfectly obedient life that we should have lived and to die on the cross as a substitute for the sins of all who would ever trust in him. On the cross, God poured out his wrath against sin *onto Jesus*—not for any sin that Jesus had committed, but for our sins. And after three days Jesus rose from the grave, conquering death and vindicating his claim to be Lord and Savior.

And now God calls all people everywhere to the most radical, fundamental change possible: to repent of our sins and trust in Christ in order to be forgiven, accepted by God, reconciled to him, and given eternal life in fellowship with him.

The bad news is, we are in desperate need of change. The good news is that through Christ's death and resurrection, the change we

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need is possible. Our sinful natures can be renewed in God's image by the Holy Spirit, and we can be reconciled to God through Christ.

In the following studies we're going to consider more about how God changes us through the gospel, beginning with the fact that through Christ, the change we need is *possible*.



## PERSONAL NOTES

# **IX** 9Marks

## **Building Healthy Churches**

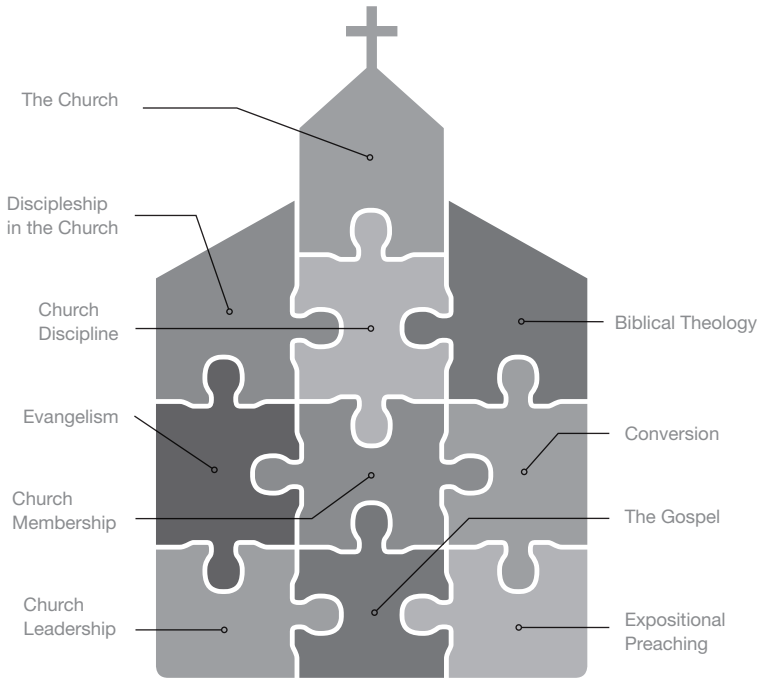
**9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.**

**To that end, we want to see churches characterized by these nine marks of health:**

- 1**    **Expositional Preaching**
- 2**    **Biblical Theology**
- 3**    **A Biblical Understanding of the Gospel**
- 4**    **A Biblical Understanding of Conversion**
- 5**    **A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism**
- 6**    **Biblical Church Membership**
- 7**    **Biblical Church Discipline**
- 8**    **Biblical Discipleship**
- 9**    **Biblical Church Leadership**

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Be sure to check out the rest of the  
**9MARKS HEALTHY CHURCH  
STUDY GUIDE SERIES**

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This series covers the nine distinctives of a healthy church as originally laid out in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever. Each book explores the biblical foundations of key aspects of the church, helping Christians to live out those realities as members of a local body. A perfect resource for use in Sunday school, church-wide studies, or small group contexts.





# CONVERSION.

There is great hope in God's power to change, and everyone needs to be changed. This study explores what God does when he saves someone, answering questions such as: What is the change we need? How does conversion happen? What are the fruits of salvation? Participants will gain a biblical understanding of conversion and the implications both for themselves and for the church.

“I am unaware of any other tool that so thoroughly and practically helps Christians understand God’s plan for the local church. I can’t wait to use these studies in my own congregation.”

**JERAMIE RINNE**, Senior Pastor, South Shore Baptist Church, Hingham, Massachusetts

“Rich exposition, compelling questions, and clear syntheses combine to give a guided tour of ecclesiology—the theology of the church. I know of no better curriculum for generating understanding of and involvement in the church than this.”

**RICK HOLLAND**, Senior Pastor, Mission Road Bible Church, Prairie Village, Kansas

“I have used these guides for the last year at my own church and appreciate how easy they are to adapt to my own setting. Highly recommended!”

**MICHAEL LAWRENCE**, Senior Pastor, Hinson Baptist Church, Portland, Oregon

**9MARKS HEALTHY CHURCH STUDY GUIDES** are a series of ten 6–7 week studies covering the nine distinctives of a healthy church originally laid out in *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever. This series explores the biblical foundations of key aspects of the church, helping Christians to live out those realities as members of a local body. Conveniently packaged and accessibly written, the format of this series is guided, inductive discussion of Scripture passages and is ideal for use in Sunday school, church-wide studies, and individual or small group contexts.

EVANGELISM

