



By

Mark McGee

Conversion: How God Creates A People by Michael Lawrence (Crossway, 2017) is part of the 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches series from Crossway. Lawrence, who is the lead pastor of Hinson Baptist Church in Portland, Oregon, has a PhD in Church History from Cambridge University and MDiv from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He also authored *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* (Crossway, 2010).

Dr. Lawrence started his book with Scripture, which I always appreciate because all of our thoughts should begin with God's Word. Here's what he chose to use –

“Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Pet. 2:10)

How God “creates a people” is primary to His eternal purpose. God created the first human beings in His image and likeness to be His “people” and has been in the process of “creating” a people for Himself since Adam and Eve became separated from God by sin. As Peter wrote, we once were “not a

people,” but now “are God’s people” because we have “received mercy.”

Dr. Lawrence paints a picture of how Christians view “conversion” today and it’s not pretty, but I agree with its accuracy. How people become true followers of Jesus Christ is, unfortunately, mixed up. Lawrence suggests in his book that Christians focus on the problem of the “theology” of conversion and with how we “apply” that theology to our church. He asks an excellent question that we definitely need to answer – “How do we work out our beliefs in practical ways that express those truths we claim to believe?”

Here are some of Dr. Lawrence’s thoughts about that from his Introduction to the book –

“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. Of course, this isn't a problem that just affects parents and children. It affects churches. When our converts from one evangelistic campaign are nowhere to be seen when the next campaign rolls around; when our members treat church as optional, to be balanced with sports leagues and vacation houses; when giving and attendance fall far short of the membership numbers; when volunteers are hard to find unless it's a social event, the problem probably isn't our evangelism technique, or poor leadership, or uninteresting worship services, or bad volunteer management. The problem may well be our practical theology of conversion. Too often we treat the symptoms. But what we really need is to go after the underlying disease." Introduction, pp 14-15

Dr. Lawrence is such a good writer that I found it difficult to pull just a few favorite quotes from the book to share with you. However, here is one that goes straight to the core of the problem in many churches –

“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.” p 35

Here are two more quotes you may find helpful –

“God saves us not because of who we are, but despite of it. Why? Because he loves us.” p 39

“Ultimately, the purpose of our salvation is not our salvation. The purpose of our salvation is God’s glory.” p 43

It’s not often in life that we deal with life-and-death issues, but Christian conversion (salvation) is one of them. I highly recommend *Conversion: How God Creates A People for every Christian to read, take to heart, and respond.*

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How Does Understanding Conversion Shape Ministry?

The way a church operates says a lot about how they believe people are saved. When a church truly embraces the Bible's teaching on conversion, they will call people to repentance and faith—not just one-time decisions, therapeutic healings, or moral lifestyles.

This short book was written to help churches rightly understand the difference that a biblical doctrine of conversion should make for teaching, evangelism, discipling, membership, and every other facet of the life of a local church.

Reviews & Endorsements

“Conversion is essential and misunderstood. Lawrence understands this and explains what the Bible teaches simply and compellingly. This small book is a big gift.” Mark Dever, pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC; president, 9Marks

“This discipleship resource has it all—pastoral clarity, urgent relevance, practical brevity, and faithfulness to the Scriptures. Line by line, every chapter contains fodder for significant discussions on what the Word says about evangelism, conversion, and the church. I’m so thankful that Michael Lawrence wrote this book—I’ll be referring to it often.” Gloria Furman, author, *The Pastor’s Wife; Missional Motherhood*; and *Alive in Him*

“Down-to-earth, clear, practical, straight shooting, biblically cogent treatment of the nature and necessity of conversion. This is an excellent book.” David F. Wells, distinguished senior research professor, Gordon-Conwell Theological

Seminary; author, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World*

“This is a biblically informed and extremely relevant book for pastors and sheep alike. Michael Lawrence hits the nail on the head when it comes to the conversion experience. Being born again is not the result of a superficial, emotional, and man-motivated prayer. This is a call to reexamine the Scriptures to see that conversion is a divine work from beginning to end, which should be externally evident by the way true disciples live in love-motivated obedience to Christ; by the interest they show in belonging to a local body of believers to whom they are accountable; and by the way they live the gospel in holiness and practice evangelism. Conversion requires repentance, and repentance requires a work of the Holy Spirit. I am delighted to see this book published at this time.” Miguel Núñez, senior pastor, International Baptist Church, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; president, Wisdom & Integrity Ministries

“In this important book Michael Lawrence outlines the biblical theology of conversion with clarity. The aim here is not to suggest that conversion makes people nice, because it is possible to be nice and not be converted. On the other hand, conversion is not a matter of mere subjectivity, for it is possible to feel converted and not be. Lawrence argues that conversion is an act that begins with God (regeneration) and bears fruit in men (repentance and faith). This overflow of God’s grace not only allows us to repent and believe, but also enables us to be inserted into the people that God created in Christ Jesus. In short, conversion culminates in membership in the local church. I heartily recommend this book.” Jonas Madureira, senior pastor, Reformed Baptist Church, São Paulo, Brazil

“Real conversion is not a facade of ‘niceness,’ nor does it depend on a decision made once years ago. True conversion is nothing less than rebirth, new creation, and new life in Christ. This book offers a clear and compelling account of conversion, according to the Scriptures. And it shows how essential a right understanding is for the life of every believer and every church. Highly

recommended.” Constantine R. Campbell, associate professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“With theological precision, but with plain and accessible language, Michael Lawrence guides us through the Scriptures to help us understand what true conversion is and what are the fruits that evidence it. This is a book I would like to place in the hands of all members of our church.” Sugel Michelen, pastor, Iglesia Bíblica del Señor Jesucristo, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

“If there is a subject that Satan has tried to confuse people about, it is the nature of true conversion. What better way to get religious people to land in hell than by letting them think they are converted when in fact they are not? Michael Lawrence has clarified this matter for us by building up from the oft-forgotten truth of regeneration, which is the foundation of conversion. He ends with the practical implications of this truth when held in biblical proportions. His pen is that of a skillful writer, and it oozes with wise pastoral counsel. I highly recommend that those of us who

know that we are truly converted should also read this delightful book so as to avoid leading others astray.” Conrad Mbewe, pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Lusaka, Zambia; chancellor, African Christian University, Lusaka, Zambia

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[I received a review copy from Crossway.]

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