

**IX** 9Marks BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

# CONVERSION

HOW  
GOD CREATES  
A PEOPLE



**MICHAEL LAWRENCE**

“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

## **9Marks: Building Healthy Churches**

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*Conversion: How God Creates a People,* Michael Lawrence

**BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES**

# **CONVERSION**



**HOW GOD  
CREATES  
A PEOPLE**

**MICHAEL LAWRENCE**

 **CROSSWAY®**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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For Adrienne,  
whose love for me  
reminds me of the gospel  
every day



“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)

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# SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

9Marks plans to produce a short, readable book on each of what Mark has called nine marks of a healthy church, plus one more on sound doctrine. Watch for books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, and church leadership.

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with

*Series Preface*

God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,  
*Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman*  
Series Editors

# INTRODUCTION

Recently I was talking to one of my friends about his two adult kids. He's worried about them. They're not into drugs or partying. They both have healthy, warm relationships with their parents and peers. They went to excellent universities and excelled. They're athletic, ambitious, beautiful, charming young adults. If they were your kids, you'd be proud of them, as my friend is. Still, you'd be worried, because neither of them seems to have the slightest interest in Jesus Christ. And to make matters more difficult, both of them identify themselves as Christians.

These two kids were raised in the church. They learned their Bible lessons in Sunday school. They were active in the youth group. They were never outwardly rebellious. They each prayed "the sinner's prayer." They were baptized. When they went off to college, they kept the nice, moral behavior they'd learned at church, but . . .

They basically left Jesus behind. They didn't abandon the name of "Christian." They simply stopped showing interest in the Christian life.

You understand why my friend is worried. He has nice kids who are convinced they don't need Jesus because they already have him. Yet the more he watches their adult lives unfold, the less and less confident he is that they even know Jesus at all.

## *Introduction*

I serve in a church where I've had a conversation like this with scores of parents. It's a heartbreaking conversation, not least because these parents feel betrayed: they did what they were told to do! They raised their children right. They led them in the sinner's prayer. They took them to church and enrolled them in all the right programs—all in the confident expectation that by doing so, their children would love Jesus too.

And it didn't work.

At this point, you might expect me to launch into a chapter or book on parenting. But I'll leave that to more seasoned and experienced hands. And it's not clear to me anyway that the problem here is a problem of parenting. Many great, conscientious parents in our churches are in the same predicament as my friend.

Instead, I suggest we focus on two other problems. First, there is a problem of theology—specifically, our theology of conversion. Second, there is a problem with how we apply that theology to our church. How do we work out our beliefs in practical ways that express those truths we claim to believe?

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 em-

ploy 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.

And that's what this book aims to do.

In the chapters that follow, I want to think carefully about the doctrine of conversion from the Scriptures. But I don't want to stop there. I want to think about the difference doctrine should make in the life of the church—from the way we go about evangelism, to our membership and discipleship practices, to how 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



## *Introduction*

a lot about his church. Or rather: show me his church, and I will describe his *functional* doctrine of conversion, regardless of what he might say in pen and ink. Our churches embody our doctrine.

So getting our theology of conversion right means more than having correct theology. It means developing ministry practices that both reflect and undergird our theological convictions.

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

# **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:**

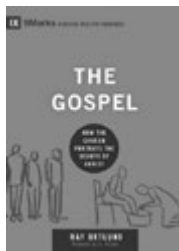
- 1 Expository Preaching**
- 2 Biblical Theology**
- 3 A Biblical Understanding of the Gospel**
- 4 A Biblical Understanding of Conversion**
- 5 A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism**
- 6 Biblical Church Membership**
- 7 Biblical Church Discipline**
- 8 Biblical Discipleship**
- 9 Biblical Church Leadership**

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## 9MARKS: BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES SERIES



Based on Mark Dever's best-selling book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, each book in this series helps readers grasp the basic biblical commands regarding the local church.

### TITLES INCLUDE:

Church Discipline	Evangelism
Church Membership	Expositional Preaching
Church Elders	The Gospel
Conversion	Missions
Discipling	Sound Doctrine



For more information, visit [crossway.org](http://crossway.org).  
For translated versions of these and other 9Marks books, visit [9Marks.org/bookstore/translations](http://9Marks.org/bookstore/translations).







## 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.

“Conversion is essential and misunderstood. Lawrence understands this and explains what the Bible teaches simply and compellingly. This small book is a big gift.”

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“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.”

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**MIGUEL NÚÑEZ**, senior pastor, International Baptist Church, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

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*\*This volume is part of the 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches series.*

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