

ESSENTIAL CHURCH, PART 10: CONVERSION

Matthew 4:12-17, 23, 18:1-3 (NASB)

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The 2004 film *Master and Commander* starring Russell Crowe tells the story of an English warship captain in 1805. Napoleon Bonaparte had gone to war with England and that war had extended to the high seas of the entire world. Captain Jack Aubrey was charged with the duty to engage French warships wherever and whenever he encountered them.

One day as Aubrey's ship, the *Surprise*, is skirting a fog bank one of the midshipmen, Mr. Hollom, thinks that he spies a warship. But then his brief glimpse disappears back into the fog. The *Surprise* is called to quarters, the men scramble to their battle positions, the captain takes the spy glass and sweeps the area. He looks and looks, but can see no evidence of another ship. Finally, as he is just about to quit, Captain Aubrey sees flashes of light in the fog. Instantly he cries for the men to get down, and in a moment the sound of cannon fire catches up with the flashes of light. Heavy cannon balls begin raining down on the *Surprise*, sending splinters of the ship flying everywhere and tearing the limbs off his men.

The first volley from what would turn out to be the French warship, the *Acheron*, subsides. As it does, Captain Aubrey, called Lucky Jack because of his successful record of engagements at sea, moves into command and action. He sends command for the ship to be positioned for battle, for the cannon to be loaded, for the sharpshooters to go to the tops of the masts, and for the colors to be run up. Rather than upset or panicked, Lucky Jack is in his element. The air of command exudes from his person. He drags a frightened midshipman to his feet and avers that everyone on the quarterdeck, the place of command, will be standing up. And then, just like his mentor Lord Nelson, he issues the command to his second: "Straight at 'em, Mr. Mowett!" The game is afoot, and no one is in doubt that Captain Jack Aubrey is both the Master and Commander.

Think for a moment of the position of everyone aboard that ship. When no attack is imminent, the ship can be commanded by a midshipman or lower officer. But when the eighteen-pound cannon shot starts raining down from heaven, when life and limb are at stake, when the seaworthiness of the ship is at risk, no one wants a lieutenant in command. At that dire moment all of the men on that ship need a leader who will lead them to their deliverance. But that deliverance is not possible without their unquestioned submission to that Commander. If even one man fails to bend his sail in the manner commanded, or one cannoneer fails to fire as directed, the likely outcome is defeat and death either at the hands of an enemy boarding party or at the bottom of the sea. In one man, Captain Jack Aubrey, is bound together their rescue and their command. You cannot have one without the other.

OUR NEED FOR A CAPTAIN

The question for us is the same with respect to our spiritual welfare and our destiny in this life and the next. If there were no sin to attack us inwardly, no devil to attack us outwardly, and no world system to guide us into the path of destruction we could just amble around the earth and do what we please. If we were not standing on the precipice of hell, then we need neither a savior nor a master.

But such is not the case, as Puritan pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote in a sermon entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God": "Therefore natural men are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, His anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of His wrath in hell, and they have done nothing in the least to appease or abate that anger, neither is God in the least bound by any promise to hold them up one moment: the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and are eager to grab hold of them, and swallow them up; the fire pent up in their own hearts is struggling to break out; and they have no interest in any Mediator, there are no means within reach that can be any security to them. In short, they have no refuge, nothing to take hold of; all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and uncovenanted, unobliged patience, of an incensed God" (English updated and transcribed by Tony Capoccia, *Bible Bulletin Board*, www.biblebb.com).

John the Baptist, at peril of his life, said this: "**The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire**" (Matthew 3:10). Whether we like this appraisal of the dire spiritual condition of every person or not, it is our reality—because holiness is God's reality.

THE CAPTAIN OF OUR SALVATION

Fortunately, we have a Captain of Our Salvation, as the King James Version translates the title for Jesus Christ found in Hebrews 2:10. The word "captain" can have three meanings in ancient Greek. It may mean "originator or founder," as it is translated in the English Standard Version. It may mean "author," as it is in the New American Standard. But it also may be translated as "captain." It is hard for me to see how a first century reader would have separated these meanings. Why should we not call Jesus Christ the Founder/Author/Captain of our salvation? He invented it, he wrote it all down, and then he led the entire thing through to his humiliation, death, and resurrection.

Is this just a cute name the pastor twisted out of Scripture to make us feel better, or is the idea of a Captain of Our Salvation central to the identity and work of Christ? For that we turn to the inauguration of Jesus' preaching ministry found in Matthew 4:12-17: "**Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, He withdrew into Galilee; and leaving Nazareth, He came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: 'THE LAND OF ZEBULUN AND THE LAND OF NAPHTALI, BY THE WAY OF THE SEA, BEYOND THE JORDAN, GALILEE OF THE GENTILES-- THE PEOPLE WHO WERE SITTING IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT, AND THOSE WHO WERE SITTING IN THE LAND AND SHADOW OF DEATH, UPON THEM A LIGHT DAWNED.'** From that time Jesus began to preach and say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matthew 4:12-17).

First of all, we have our dire spiritual condition confirmed. We are those non-Israelites sitting in darkness, the very shadow of death. And then the Captain of Our Salvation came to us and turned on the light of life. Jesus did this by proclaiming exactly the same words as John the Baptist: "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.**" As John preached it in the context of Old Covenant revelation these words are a call to change our minds and therefore our behavior about the personal significance of the

rule of God in our lives. If God says: "Do not commit adultery," and we have done so, then we are summoned to the waters of baptism like any other pagan to confess our sins, be washed in the forgiveness of God, and then go and sin no more.

These words have led theologians to scratch their heads for centuries. Why did Jesus not immediately say: "I am Messiah, and I am going to die to atone for your sins—believe in me"? This discussion is now raging again in the emergent church movement, but it has been considered among liberal theologians a plain truth that Jesus never planned to make atonement the central fact of salvation. Christianity as we know it is considered by them to be the invention of the Apostle Paul. But how many times did Jesus have to teach the atonement for it to be central? How about Matthew 20:28 as one example? **"...The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many"** (Matthew 20:28).

Jesus was never saying exactly the same thing as John the Baptist. The message changed the moment the plan of redemption passed from John to Jesus. In contradistinction to John, Jesus is that very light to those who sit in darkness. It is now the Jesus who always planned to provide atonement for sins who says: **"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."** Verse twenty three says it this way: **"Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people"** (Matthew 4:23). The gospel--the good news—of Jesus Christ is explicitly said to be his kingdom, which in the church age refers to his personal rule over the hearts of every one who believes. The rescue offered by the Captain of Our Salvation is bound integrally to his rule. Lucky Jack's sailors were dead men if they did not leap to obey their captain's commands in the heat of battle. And so are we dead if we do not leap to obey the King who saves our souls. The salvation is one with the obedience. This is not legalism. His first and primary command is for us all to receive his atoning work for our sins and be set free from the law of sin and death to walk with him in newness of life.

If the submission part of the good news seems alien to us it is because the whole tenor of Christianity today has minimized the fact that Jesus is our Master and Commander as part and parcel of being our Savior and friend. It should not surprise us that human sin, the Devil, and the world system are constantly fostering false Christianities where the human will does not have to submit itself to its Lord. This is the wide and easy way to which Jesus referred, which leads to death. The narrow way is neither the legalistic way, nor the secret way, nor the Christian superstar way, but the gospel way. This is the way of seeing our dire need and taking our place under the wise and loving rule of the Captain of Our Salvation. It is narrow because very few people are willing to do this.

CONVERSION TO THE REDEEMER KING

Jesus explained this in an analogy found at the beginning of Matthew's eighteenth chapter: **"At that time the disciples came to Jesus and said, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, and said, 'Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven'"** (Matthew 18:1-3). The word for "converted" in the Greek is also translated "turn" or "change" and it refers in context to a complete change in the direction of our lives.

You see, the disciples were arguing about how to become great in the kingdom of Jesus. I give

them credit for thinking that Messiah is a real King who is destined to rule on the real earth. But this led them to import their worldly ideas of how Messiah's kingdom would work. The vaunting of self has no part in Messiah's kingdom, so Jesus issued an ultimatum: "**...Unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.**"

If you have had children or worked with them in any way, you know that this cannot be a reference to their purity or obedience. Surely Jesus was referring to the kind of simple dependence children display upon their parents. He wanted his disciples to simply accept his leadership that going for power and prestige was not where he was leading. He needed them to go where he was leading, which we have already heard in Matthew 20:28: "**...The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.**"

So conversion looks like the simple unconflicted followership of the Captain of Our Salvation. The linking of the term repentance, as both John and Jesus did, connects conversion to a reordering of the mind which leads to a reordering of the life. David Wells, in his landmark book entitled *No Place for Truth*, explains why this is such a radical turnaround: "The modern world has become, for so many, a matter of ultimacy. All moderns are, in this sense, believers. Their world gives them their values and horizons, their life and sustenance, and they look for nothing outside or beyond what modernity provides. They live by it, and in the end they die by it." Wells goes on to write: "I do not believe in much that is present because I believe too much in what is now thought not be present. I disbelieve in the modern world because I believe in God, and in his Christ" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, p. 285).

Now, we all know that mere human conversion—a turnaround of life to follow a religious leader—is not an infallible sign of regeneration, or truth, or anything. Communism has practiced a kind of conversion, as does every religion on earth. Many people abandon their old ways and embrace religion who do not have saving faith.

But, as Christ insisted, unless there is a conversion to him by faith there is no salvation. As David Wells so clearly expressed, conversion is caused by the embracing of Jesus Christ in his irreducible totality as Savior, Master, Physician, and Friend. It is the true knowledge of God which brings this about. It will look different in different people, but the abandonment of worldly truth and values must take place, as does the uncomplicated embracing of the reality of Christ as Captain of Our Salvation. And as John MacArthur wrote, perhaps the minimum sign of conversion which can be inwardly felt and outwardly observed is genuine sorrow for our sin. We may still be stuck in some doozies, but we are no longer at peace about that and our new inner desire is to find a way out by following our Captain.

Conversion, then, is all about taking the correct position with respect to Christ, as he explained to his disciples: "**Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven**" (Matthew 18:4). When we see our dire condition we see why we need to take our place in the kingdom order because our salvation comes through our Captain and in no other way.

CONVERSION KEY TO AN ESSENTIAL CHURCH

Conversion is fundamental to an essential church because Jesus Christ says so. Without becoming legalistic or judgmental toward others we build the true concept of our Captain into

everything that we say and do. It is the first point of our local church mission which is to "introduce people everywhere to forgiveness, healing, and purpose in Jesus Christ."

This unified concept of our Lord is built right into his name. Jesus means "Yahweh saves" in Hebrew and Christ means "Holy One," a concept of a Messiah who is King. For his sake we disbelieve in the views and values of a lost world, and we reorder our minds on the basis of his revealed truth, no matter how much we have to fight our own wayward tendencies or the pressures of that world. To put this in its most simple form, the only evidence that any of us are following Christ is a change in life and thinking, from seeking of self to holistic followership of the Lord who is rescuing us as we follow him. That is conversion.

Whether we like to think of it this way or not, we are all dangling by a thread. We are onboard a ship where eighteen-pound cannonballs are blowing our shipmates to pieces, and we look to be next. The Captain of Our Salvation is calling out instructions to us. What will be our response? Lucky Jack was a great sea captain, but we have a greater Captain who will not fail to steer us to salvation as we embrace his call to conversion.

Have you invited Jesus Christ to be your Captain? He is Captain. Is he yours?

[clip from *Master and Commander* DVD, 2004, 0:06:46-0:10:08, Master and Commander clip1.avi, 3:22 min.]