

# Born Again: Conversion in an Age of Deconversion

## Sermons from 1 Peter 1-2 Sermon 3

John 3:3-8; 1 Peter 1:3-5

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<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:3-8, ESV)

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<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup> who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3-5, ESV)

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In the public square that is social media, a new genre of self-disclosure narratives has emerged: The Deconversion Story. Its form is familiar: former evangelical leader, pastor, writer, announces that after said number of years in the church, they no longer believe and are leaving the faith. A few lines of text below the Instagram picture act as a new testimonial with common themes: a journey of discovery, a need to be honest with oneself, disappointed with the church.

Stories of Christians leaving the faith are sad and can be unsettling. They can cause us to ask hard questions. While I don’t doubt the sincerity of the deconversion stories I read, their frustration with failings in the church or struggles with their faith, I do wonder, at least in some cases, if G. K. Chesterton’s adage isn’t applicable:

***The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.***

Moreover, the growing ease with which people de-convert, and the warm public affirmation deconversion stories are met with, reveal two things, and raise a fundamental question.

## Deconversion Reveals Pseudo-Conversions and an Appealing Alternative

### 1. Converted to Pseudo-Christianities

The ease with which some people de-convert reveals that, at least in some cases, they may never have been adherents to a robust Christian orthodoxy to start with. Since the 1960s, the Church in America has been beset, as journalist Ross Douthat has noted, “not by too much religion or too little religion, but by bad religion: the slow-motion moral collapse of traditional Christianity and the rise of a variety of destructive pseudo-Christianities in its place.”<sup>1</sup>

Douthat and others have worried that in efforts to accommodate the faith to cultural trends, we have presented twisted versions of the Gospel, from the self-help therapeutic to the get-rich-by-prayer of the prosperity Gospel. In other words, people may have thought they were following Jesus, when really their hearts were bent on some version of the American Dream of Hollywood’s vision of happiness.

### 2. Appeal of an Alternative Creed

A second thing deconversion stories reveal is the appeal of an alternative. There is what you might call as “secular creed” that has emerged, which promises much of the moral beauty of Christianity, without any of the cost of discipleship. You may see the signs of the new creed in your neighbor’s lawn, which open with the statement, “In this house we believe,” followed by several moral epithets emphasizing the worth and importance of all people—statements which on their face one could hardly be disagreed with.

People aren’t deconverting to rush into a wild life of sin; they are deconverting—at least in culture’s eyes, to become better saints. There is a not-so-subtle sense that the failures of the church in the past, and the strictures of its morality in the present, make it a pariah, not a blessing.

So, the growing ease and celebration with which deconversion stories are met, suggests that we have not disciplined people unto a robust Christian orthodoxy on the one hand. And, for the morally inclined, the culture is offering an increasingly appealing alternative.

*How should the Church respond to deconversion stories?*

We could remind people that while their church has its failings, it also has offered the world staggering benefits. We could point out, as many have, that the emerging secular creed grows out of Christian soil. That our culture's moral ideals of human dignity and equality and care for the disenfranchised derive "ultimately from claims made in the Bible: that humans are made in God's image; that his Son died equally for everyone; there is neither Jew nor Greek; slave nor free, male nor female."<sup>2</sup>

But I think there is a more important matter that deconversion raises, and that is the nature of conversion in the first place. Deconversion implies the reality of conversion. And I believe what these stories require is to pause, turn afresh to the Bible, and ask what conversion means and what it entails in the first place. And this is precisely where our passage from 1 Peter takes our attention today.

After introducing himself as an "apostle" and his readers as "elect exiles" in verses 1-2, in verses 3-5 Peter draws attention to the radical transformation that has occurred in the lives of Christians, the role God has played in it, and what it entails. It all centers around the idea of "being born again," as Peter says in verse 3, God has "caused us to be born again." This radical idea takes us into the heart of Christian conversion. We take a close look at these few verses, 3-5, and discover four truths about Christian conversion that help reorient us in the face of so-called deconversions.

## **I. Conversion Is About New, not Nice**

Peter's understanding of "being born again" comes directly from his Lord's teachings. In an event recounted in John 3, a man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, and they get into a conversation about how one enters the Kingdom of God. Jesus says to him:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."  
(John 3:3-6)

The language in John 3 and in 1 Peter 1:3 teaches us that becoming a Christian—a follower of Jesus Christ—involves more than a moral makeover or adherence to a new creed; it involves being made radically new.

### 1. Appeal of Nice

Nicodemus, however, didn't think he needed to be made new, but rather wanted to become nicer. He was a nice guy, a good guy, a religious guy, a well-respected guy. He assumed that becoming worthy of God's Kingdom meant being, essentially, nice.

The idea of nice has a lasting appeal. People like nice people. Nice is within our reach; we can do nice. *Try a little harder not to swear, speak more softly, slow down in traffic, give away some money, take a more diminutive posture when talking with others.* In many ways, the church can present being a Christian as being a nice person. *Trying a little harder to be a little nicer to other people—that's the key.*

## 2. Problem with Nice

But there is a problem with nice. First, nice can easily become all about me; being nice makes me feel good about myself and means people will like me. Second, nice doesn't quite cut it when it comes to the needs of the world and moral requirements of God.

Nice is like the meow of a domestic cat—it gets attention but isn't loud or noticeable enough to really bother anyone. But what if the love the world needs, and the worship God demands requires something more like the moral equivalent of the roar of a lion. Nice won't die for you. Nice won't forgive you of a horrible offense. We need more than nice.

## 3. Dead

The real problem with nice is it misunderstands the human condition. We are not a little out of shape morally and simply in need of some discipline and good coaching. We are, spiritually, dead: "You were dead in your trespasses and sins," Paul writes (Ephesians 2:1). The fact that our hearts are not constantly moved to worship God, and constantly moved to love others, is the spiritual equivalent of a body with no oxygen.

We are spiritually dead. We lack the spiritual tastebuds that would enjoy God; We lack the spiritual reflexes that would reject all sin; We lack the spiritual muscles that would love God and neighbor; Because we are spiritually dead. And as sinners, our deadness entails being under the judgement of God because of our sinful rebellion.

## 4. Made Alive

Therefore, Christian conversion is not about becoming nice; it's about becoming new. And this is not an act of our own but must be an act of God.

### God's Action

Notice who acts in verse 3 to change us: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." God is the actor; He has "caused us to be born again." And the preceding condition of this act of God, is not "our moral worth," but, as the passage says, "His great mercy."

### How it works

To add more detail, we can note that God acts to bring about new birth through the following process.

- **Spirit:** The Spirit is at work, as Jesus says, "born of water and the Spirit," causing the dead heart to come to life. This "life" is in the form of a new spiritual sensibility—like new taste buds<sup>3</sup>—making the discernment of true evil and true righteousness possible.
- **Word:** God then speaks to this newly awakened heart through His Word. Like the notes of a song striking deaf ears that have been suddenly awakened, the human heart hears the Word of God for the first time in such a way that it strikes them spiritually. This is why the next time Peter mentions being born again, he introduces the role of the Word: "<sup>23</sup> Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Peter 1:23).
- **Faith:** The person's heart suddenly leans towards Jesus; believing He is there, that He loves them, that He died for them. The human response takes the form of a humble repentance of sin, and a decision to "turn away" from sin and "turn toward Jesus" and follow him.<sup>4</sup> This human response is what we call faith.

## 5. Signs of life

*How does this change our view of conversion in the church?* Rather than looking for signs of nice, we should look for signs of **new**—signs that someone has been made radically new. While only God knows perfectly one’s heart, we can notice signs of life ourselves.

Here are three signs of “new”:

### 1. **Esteem of Jesus**

Jonathan Edwards suggests that a sign of conversion is seen when one’s esteem of Jesus—born of the Virgin, crucified for our Sins, raised from the dead—grows in a person’s heart.”<sup>5</sup>

### 2. **Bent toward godliness and way from sin**

There is a bend towards God and godliness, akin to a desire to honor God and worship Him, and a persistent hatred of one’s sins. No, one has not come to the point of never sinning; but one can never go back to being comfortable with their sin.<sup>6</sup> The new nature may only be a tiny seed—but it is there, and the old nature no longer has the final sway.

### 3. **Love of God and His People**

Third, as Saint John teaches, we not only love God, but we truly love our brothers and sisters in Christ: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7)

A true convert has been made new, not just nice.

## **II. Conversion Sets Ultimate Hope, Not in Goodness Now, but in God’s Promise to Come**

A second aspect of conversion that arises from our passage, has to do with the hope that arrives with new life. Peter writes that we have been “... born again to a **living hope** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, **to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,**” (1 Peter 1:3-4).

There are many blessings that come to us immediately upon our conversion: peace with God, belonging in the people of God, the inward work of the Holy Spirit to sanctify, heal, and help us. But the vision of

ultimate hope lies, not below our feet, but just over the horizon. As God's people, we are now promised eternal life in God's future Kingdom.

Conversion, therefore, is not to a utopian hope about this present life. Christians are never told that they will turn their culture of world into the kingdom of God; rather, they are told that that Kingdom is breaking in, but against great resistance, and its culmination will not happen prior to the Lord's return. They live "in between the times." This tension is felt in the world around and within—even our own longings and dreams will not be ultimately satisfied in this present life.

This means Christian converts must get used to the notion of proximate—close to something, but not quite there, as our friend Steve Garber likes to point out. We must make our peace with "proximate justice," "proximate peace," and "proximate happiness," until the Son of God returns and the Kingdom of God is fully established.<sup>7</sup>

The closing words in the Bible are not, "go work harder to find happiness and make this world into heaven." The closing words are "come, Lord Jesus, come!" (Revelation 22:20.). After every good work and good joy we have we could add the sentence, "come, Lord Jesus!"

I wondered if many who deconvert from the faith, we converted to a pseudo-Christianity that subtly promised their hearts some type of heaven now. They were taught to believe that God's main aim was to give them all their hearts desires, right here, and right now. Rather than being taught that God calls us to a hope in an inheritance that is kept for us in heaven, soon to be revealed, but not yet under our feet.

### **III. Conversion is Unto Salvation from God's Moral Indignation, not for Moral Indignation.**

In verse 5 Peter adds yet another aspect of what we are born again into: we are born again <sup>5</sup> ... for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:5).

The word "salvation" is a common one in Christian understandings of conversion. "Being saved" can be synonymous for "being born again." But I wonder if we are so clear on what this salvation focuses upon in letters like 1 Peter; *Do we know what we are saved from?*

Modern Western Christianity can subtly focus salvation on the idea of being saved from your own personal unhappiness. God saves you from a bad job, or saves your marriage, or saves you from depression. These are, of course, things God cares about. But there is a problem here. It may be God that saves you from your unhappiness; but for your neighbor, it may just as well be a new job, or new spouse, that saves him from his unhappiness.

We make a mistake when we reduce the Gospel to salvation from our own, personal unhappiness. First Peter has in mind Salvation from the moral indignation of God. We are saved from the objective reality of God's wrath upon sin—and we are sinners.

**God is good, and therefore, cannot abide forever with injustice and sin. Many people note that hell is the absence of God. But it is just as true that hell is the full presence of God's Justice, unmediated by the grace of His patience and forgiveness of the Cross.**

I worry that our culture and our churches are preaching a salvation, not from God's moral indignation at our sins, but a salvation unto *my* moral indignation towards others' sins. The secular creed fosters moral indignation towards the sins of others. It fosters a self-righteousness that covers the sins of the *self*. We must emphasize that to be born again is to be saved from the wrath of God through the death of Jesus Christ. That is Christian conversion, and nothing less will do.

## **IV. A Convert is Not a Decision, she is a Disciple**

The warp and woof of 1 Peter does not focus on a past decision that these Christians made. It focuses on the present lives they are living. Too often our churches have offered assurance to converts based on a prayer they said or decision they made. These moments, these lines drawn in the sand, are important. And they may indeed mark a time when God acted decisively to bring you new life. However, as John Piper has said, "we know we are alive not because of our birth certificate, but because we are breathing."

We have watched too many young people say a prayer at age 13, then from age 18-35 show almost zero interest in Jesus or His Church, while continuing to consider themselves Christians. Perhaps they are, and God will call them back. But conversion is about a whole way of life—discipleship, not merely a decision.



Discipleship is actively worshiping and actively following Jesus, alongside the people of Jesus, His church. Discipleship is where we help prevent the deconstruction of faith that leads to deconversion. Discipleship is where we properly construct faith.

My vision for our church is a culture of discipleship—where together, we help each other follow Jesus; we help construct robust faith for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whereas culture aims to deconstruct your faith, discipleship is where you receive guidance and reassurance:

Yes, the Bible has an amazing vision of Justice—just listen to the Prophets of the Old Testament.

Yes, science and faith are complimentary—and faith answers questions science cannot.

Yes, both men and women have equal dignity—because God made them both in His image.

If your conversion comes down to only a decision you made years ago, and not a life of discipleship, then your deconversion may not be a deconversion at all, but simply an acknowledgement of where your heart always was.

We close by noticing a last word in our text: *guarded*. Peter says in verse five that those who are born again are “by God’s power being guarded.” God keeps His children—even if they seem to walk away from Him for a time.

I imagine that word “guarded” meant much for Peter. For his own conversion seem to take a nosedive into deconversion at one point—when he even denied knowing Jesus.

But God keeps those who are His.

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## Endnotes

1. Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, (Free Press, 2013), 3.
2. Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic, 2019), 523.
3. See Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light”

4. Mark 1:15, “repent and believe in the gospel.”
5. Jonathan Edwards, “The Distinguishing Marks of A Work of the Spirit of God”
6. Ibid.
7. See Garber’s work on “proximate?": <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/finding-our-way-to-great-work-even-in-politics-making-peace-with-proximate-justice/> Accessed May 8, 2021.