

## Assurance for the Early-Converted

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Today's message is an application of 1 John for those of you who, like me, grew up with Christianity. You perhaps cannot remember a time when you weren't in church, reading your Bible, praying. It has been a part of your life all along. And I want to particularly address the special difficulties that we face in gaining that often elusive assurance of our salvation. If this doesn't happen to be you, the truths here apply to everyone.

I am calling this person the "early-converted." I would like to distinguish the early-converted from the early-professing or the early-involved in Christianity but not genuinely saved. The early-converted are those who have truly been regenerated by the Holy Spirit; the actually saved.

And today I speak as an insider. I am one of you. I grew up in the Christian faith. I have known about Christ all of my life. I professed Christ as my Savior as a 6-year-old boy on my knees with my dad by the couch in our living room. I look to that as the actual beginning of my walk with Jesus. I grew up in church. I participated in children's ministries like AWANA and VBS. I was very involved in youth group and Bible studies. However, I greatly struggled through my teens and early 20s with assurance of my salvation for reasons I will get into. When I say struggle, I mean struggle. I remember lying in bed at night and my heart racing, unable to sleep thinking, *What if I am pretender? What if I die and find out I didn't do something right?* Even later while training for ministry in seminary, I experienced great fears about this, looking back to my childhood conversion, wondering if it was real. *Am I actually saved?*

There have always been controversies regarding the nature of childhood faith. Jonathan Edwards, the great American theologian, was engulfed in a controversy regarding children and conversion and it cost him his pastoral position in the church.

Tremendous ministries have arisen from a belief that children *can* be saved. Child Evangelism Fellowship, one of the largest mission organizations in the world, began when their founder, Jesse Overholtzer, read a quote of Charles Spurgeon in 1937 which said, "A child of 5 if properly instructed can as truly believe and be regenerated as an adult." They have reached hundreds of thousands of children for Christ.

The Bible has many examples of genuine childhood faith, including Samuel, Timothy, David the shepherd boy, Mary the mother of Jesus, Josiah, Daniel, and of course, Jesus himself.

Here at Bethel we take children's ministries very seriously and pour tremendous effort and resources into reaching and discipling our children for Jesus. But everyone has to agree that there are difficulties in understanding how God works in the heart of a child who is growing in their awareness of morality and sin and guilt and beginning to learn about Jesus dying for their sins and what it means to have a personal faith in him.

## Faith Tendencies of those Converted Early

### Low assurance

The churches that I grew up in often asked you to share your testimony...and you better have a good one. My friend, Matt Hunley in high school was always kind of a jokester and one time Matt was asked to share his testimony so he said, "Well, I could tell you about years of drugs and sex and rock 'n roll...but then God saved me at the age of six." One reason that it is humorous is that it brings up something that many of us struggle with.

#### 1. Cannot look back and see a radical change in your life

Scripture teaches that there is no difference among sinners in our status before God. We are all condemned, totally. So the criminal and the 6-year-old are both condemned; equally lost, equally depraved.

However, there is a difference in the extent that they display their sinfulness. The boy or girl has not expressed or experienced his depravity to the degree the adult likely has. This is important because the moral life of the 6-year-old post conversion is somewhat different than before conversion, but the adult's is often radically different.

If you were converted at a young age, have you ever been asked to give your testimony at something and thought, *Testimony, what testimony?* All that I can say is that *I became a Christian when I was a kid, grew up in the church, and here I am.* Sometimes we feel like we have to make it juicy with some super sin we did when we were eleven.

But often as your memory of the "event" of salvation fades, you don't have the dramatic evidence of a changed moral life before and after. For those saved later, most of the time there has been a lifestyle of sin which salvation so plainly changes that the transformation itself generates assurance. That is not so for the early-converted and over time assurance can ebb away.

#### 2. Present dissatisfaction with their Christianity

Early converts become teenagers and adults and there can be dissatisfaction with Christianity. There are many reasons... here are a few:

*Perceive a hypocrisy in the parents, church, etc.*

They get older and see a spiritual vacuum in their parents or some church experience and it turns them off to the message that they claimed when they were children.

*Greater realization of the cost of being a disciple of Christ*

- You mean I can't \_\_\_\_\_?
- You mean I'm going to be different?

*Nothing's going on....*

You grow up hearing about David and Goliath and Daniel in the Lions' Den. *I can't wait to be a teenager!* Then you become a teenager and it's different from what you were expecting. No Goliaths. No lions. Just normal life. Normal family. It doesn't seem as glamorous as "daring to be a Daniel."

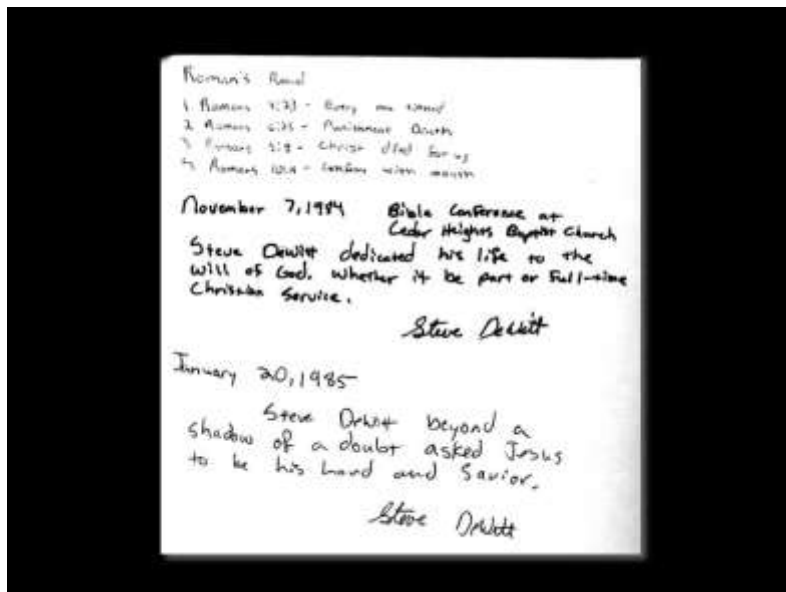
So there are lots of early converts walking around with low levels of assurance. Their energy is low. Their zeal is low. Their faith is low.

### Desire to “show they really mean it”

This waning assurance leads to a strong feeling of guilt. *Something is terribly wrong. No one around me seems to be struggling like I am. What is the deal? Why do I feel the way that I do?* The early convert may look for ways to prove to himself that when he committed to Jesus, he really meant it.

1. *Pray the sinner’s prayer again and again.* I did this. I probably prayed the sinner’s prayer thousands of times just in case the one I prayed the time before didn’t stick. There was such a focus on praying the prayer. To show the weakness of this, a 2011 Barna survey showed that 50% of Americans have prayed the sinner’s prayer at some point in their life and believe they are going to heaven even though they rarely attend church, read their Bible, or have lifestyles different from those outside the church.
2. *“Recommit their life to Christ.”* I grew up in a church where there were stages you had to go through – first you became a Christian, and then later on, it was very important that you would rededicate your life to Jesus and most of us did it at camp every summer. You would get all fired up, come home and then three days later everything was back to normal. But you could always look back to your “mountaintop experience” and feel good about your salvation.
3. *Look to radical obedience as signs of salvation.* I am going to Moody Bible and then I am going to reach human flesh-eating cannibals for Jesus and then I am going to establish a Bible school there and then I am.... Inside, I must be saved...look at how radical for Jesus I am...And all the while there remains guilt, anxiety, frustration, and more guilt for feeling this way because they never seem to be able to show it enough.

To show you how crazy this whole thing is, I want to show you a picture of the back page of the Bible I grew up with (below). These are in chronological order. First, notice the Romans Road. It was there so that if I ever had an opportunity to lead people to Jesus, I would be ready. So there I am concerned about evangelism.



Secondly, here I am in one of my go forward experiences. November 7, 1984. Bible Conference at Cedar Heights Baptist Church. "Steve DeWitt dedicated his life to the will of God, whether it be part- or full-time Christian service." I remember that night, it was one of these altar calls where the pianist played like 15 stanzas of "I Surrender All" and around the 13<sup>th</sup>, the pastor said, "If anybody here wants to serve the Lord in Christian service, come on forward!" So I went forward and I wrote it down in my Bible.

Then January 20, 1985, two months later, I'm right back into my despair. Am I saved or not? Somebody said to me if you want to know you're saved or not, you have to put a stake in it, which meant that you wrote it down. So one more time, I prayed to receive Jesus as my Savior and I wrote it down. And I can tell you that I struggled with assurance of my salvation for probably seven more years after that.

### **A nagging question, *Is it really true?***

All of these pressures, this low assurance, make the early convert, late at night when nobody is watching, wonder if this whole Christianity thing is really true.

They may ask questions like...

- *What if I've just been brainwashed as a kid into believing this stuff?*
- *What if I am like the Islamic kid or the Buddhist kid, blindly following my parents?*
- *What if I am making these sacrifices for nothing and there really isn't a God?*

### **Why Does the Early Convert Think This Way?**

#### **The difference between childhood thinking and adult thinking**

Children think about things in more concrete terms. "My dad is the greatest dad in the world," or "my brother is stronger than anyone else's brother."

A child can understand that Jesus died for their sin but may not be able to explain the atonement, or justification. She can understand doing what Jesus said but not be able to explain what it means to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. If they believe in the true gospel, they truly become Christians. As they mature, their ability to think matures, and they can understand more abstract things. But often they are not being disciplined by their parents or their church, so their understanding of Christianity and how to think Christianly about their world doesn't.

What happens is, as your ability to think matures, you look back at your thinking as a child and you can be tormented wondering if you really understood enough to become a Christian<sup>1</sup>.

This is partly what makes legalism so attractive. If I follow certain rules, even if man-made, I can have assurance that I am good with God. Legalism is artificial assurance of salvation.

#### **The enlarging circle of life**

Their awareness of the Lordship of Jesus Christ doesn't increase with their increasing responsibilities.<sup>2</sup>

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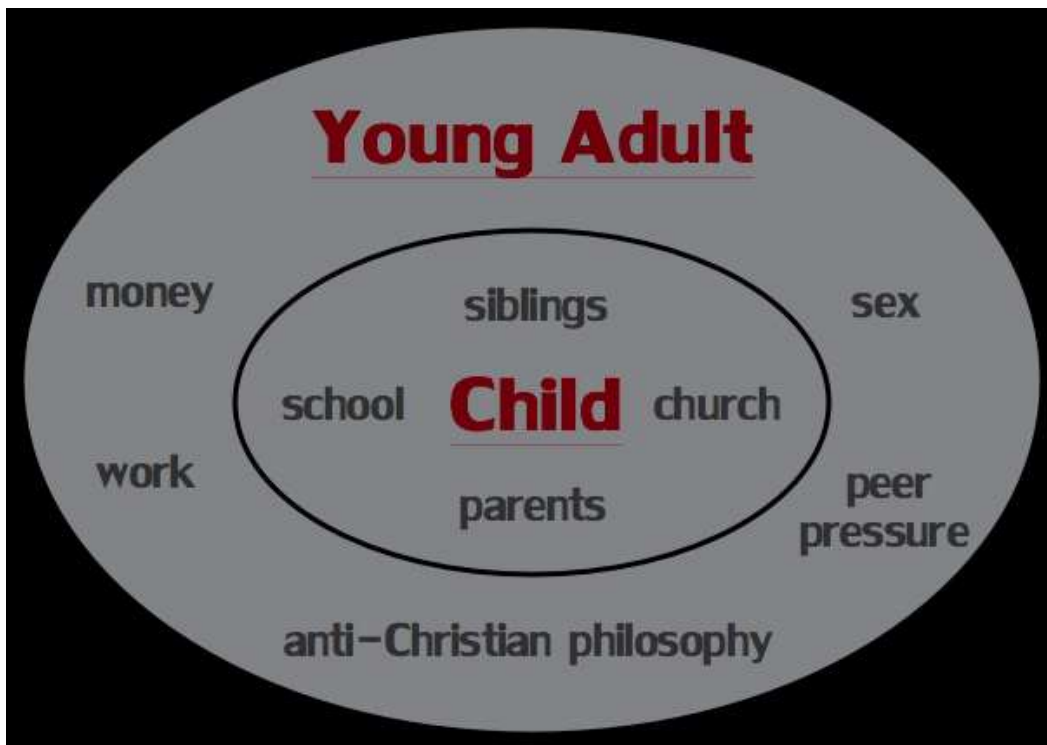
<sup>1</sup> Whitney, [How can I be sure that I'm a Christian?](#), p. 100

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

Take a look at the graphic below. The small circle represents the life of a 6-year-old. She realizes when she becomes a Christian that everything in the circle belongs to Jesus.



Here's another graphic representing her life at age 18 and now life includes things that she never dreamed of when she thought she became a Christian. Until she realizes that all of those things also belong to Jesus, her actions in these areas will resemble her non-Christian friends, and this leads to a crisis in her life.



### **Special considerations**

These common struggles are one reason that we, along with many churches, have a recommendation. It's not a rule because the Bible doesn't make it a rule, but it is a recommendation that children wait to be baptized until their ability to understand the imagery of baptism matures. People ask, "How old is that?" and our response is that around age 12 seems to be a good guideline. When they are older, their salvation experience may be a faint one but their baptism will be a remembered and cherished step of faith.

Let's get the gospel right with our kids. The gospel is not, "ask Jesus into your heart." I really wish we would not use that phrase at all because it is not a biblical description of salvation. Simply asking Jesus into your heart doesn't save you if that is all that you do.

We want our children to believe Jesus is God's Son who died on the cross for their sins. The gospel is simple but we have to get it right. Undoubtedly, people can be saved in "asking Jesus into their heart," but that's only because it is Christian cliché for what truly saves—placing their faith in what Jesus did for them on the cross as their Savior.

### **How the Early-converted Can Have True Assurance**

#### **Not then, but now**

One of the real pitfalls of a decisional focus on evangelism is that it overly focuses on a moment of salvation. Philippians 2:12 and Hebrews 10:26-39 teach us that salvation begins in a moment, but it is much more than that. Paul calls it a race in Galatians 5 and 2 Timothy 4. It has a start, a middle, and a conclusion. And all of it is our salvation. A true Christian can say, *I was saved in the past, I was saved today, and I will be saved tomorrow.*

But decisional evangelism focuses on the moment which means that if you can't remember exactly when you were saved, *date and time*, your salvation is somewhat questionable. And from a right biblical perspective, all this anxiety is quite unnecessary.

If I were to ask you, how do you know that you were born physically? You might show me your birth certificate, or you may tell me your mom remembers it, etc. But what is the best way to know?

The most convincing proof that you were born physically is that you are here today. Do you remember all the details surrounding your physical birth? My daughter doesn't remember being born, and speaking as an eyewitness, it's best that she doesn't. But she'll always know she was born because she is alive. You were born at some point even if you don't remember the details.

The same thing is true in the spiritual realm. The best proof that you were born again spiritually is that you are presently spiritually alive! So the questions that matter are, *Do I have signs of spiritual life now? Think of what we've seen in 1 John. Do I believe rightly about Jesus? Is my life directionally toward obedience? Do I love others?* Are you showing signs of being spiritually alive? When you were exactly converted means little; the most important thing is that you *are* converted.

By the same token, no matter what your memory may be or you have the date written in your Bible somewhere, if you are not loving and walking with Jesus now and if there is little evidence of the Spirit of God at work in your life, and if you have little desire to please the Lord in the practical areas of your life, then there is little reason to think that you were truly born again in the past.

#### **Submit every aspect of your life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ**

Oftentimes what happens is, the early convert comes to a spiritual crisis in his life. Some people mistakenly call this, "making Christ Lord of your life." In reality, he is returning to

Christ's Lordship over all of life which is what he gave himself to when he became a Christian.<sup>3</sup> It is important to make the circle all God's.

However, I also believe that many people that come to that crisis are in reality becoming Christians for the first time. They may have been awakened to Christianity as a child, but not truly converted. It was an emotional response to the gospel like the rocky soil in Matthew 13 but it never truly took root.

Later in life, this crisis comes when it's either the way of the world or the way of Christianity: puberty, college, the transition out from under the authority of their parents. And then for the first time, there is a giving of oneself to Christ in what is truly saving faith. A taking up of the cross of Christ and following him which Jesus says in Mark 8:34 is the only kind of faith that saves. Whatever you call it, it leaves the teenager or young adult with a renewed sense of spirituality and assurance.

So one way to overcome the early convert pitfall is to actively and radically submit every aspect of your life to Christ. Don't allow little sins; ruthlessly give all of your life to God.

### **Realize that God is at work in you right now!**

Remember the boring testimony problem. That is just wrong theology and horrible Christology. Do you think Jesus would say how we were saved is boring? Realize that your salvation is no less supernatural, no less spectacular than the most dramatic of conversions. Each of us was under God's judgment. Each of our sins required the shedding of the precious blood of Christ. In God's eyes, there is no difference between the morally naïve child and the prostitute, drunkard, or murderer. Every salvation is a dramatic and undeserved work of the grace of God.

And God is at work in you. You do have Goliaths, you do have lions. And God's call to David and Daniel are the same for you, *Follow me. Be bold and obedient. And trust me.*

Assurance is worth seeking. God wants us to have it, but only if we are truly saved. And that's as true for those of us who grew up in Christianity as those who did not.

So if you are seeking God today and following Christ by faith, then let God's Word give you the assurance that you have longed for and rest in the saving love of our God.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 102.