



True Conversion and Wholehearted Commitment: *Foundations of Discipleship*

by Thomas A. Tarrants, III, D. Min.

Director of Ministry, C.S. Lewis Institute

This article originally appeared in the Summer 2011 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

George Orwell famously said, “Sometimes the first duty of intelligent men is the restatement of the obvious.” We live in such a time today.

In America there is widespread foginess and confusion about what it means to be a Christian. This can be seen in much preaching, and it is painfully obvious in the lives of vast numbers of people who profess salvation through Christ but seem to have no clue of what this actually means in terms of beliefs and behavior. In such a time, it is the duty of every serious follower of Jesus Christ to go back to the basics. In this article, we will seek to do so by reexamining what Jesus taught about true conversion and total commitment. Our goal is to understand rightly the call of Jesus so as to please and honor him in daily life. And we do this not for our sake alone, but also for those we seek to reach and teach, for the church to which we belong, and for the watching world, which desperately needs to see authentic followers of Christ.

As we begin, we remind ourselves that Christ’s call to true conversion and wholehearted commitment is rooted before all else in the grace of a merciful God, who loves us and calls us to life in his Son. This life cannot be earned by repentance, faith, total commitment or anything else we do. Our part is simply to receive it as offered.

Context

Before looking at the teachings of Jesus on these key themes, we note the broader context of his life and work, found in Genesis and the Fall.

In Genesis we see God creating a beautiful world and two people, whom he made in his own image and

placed in a garden-like paradise. Filled with all they needed or could desire, the garden was a special gift from God, a place for them to care for and enjoy. And it was a place for them to experience personal fellowship with God. God’s only restriction was that they not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.



Thomas A. Tarrants, III

How long this happy state continued we do not know, but at some point things went horribly wrong. Adam and Eve eventually disobeyed God’s command and ate from the forbidden tree. Their disobedience was not an innocent mistake but a willful rebellion against God’s lordship and loving care over their lives. It came about through the deceit and seduction of that “proud spirit,” the devil, who had himself earlier rebelled against God. Taking the form of a talking serpent, the devil sought to inculcate unbelief in Adam and Eve by suggesting that God was withholding something good from them by forbidding the fruit of that one tree. Simultaneously he enticed them to pride by assuring them that through eating the forbidden fruit they would become “like God.” Thus, by succumbing to pride and unbelief, they fell from their original innocence. The consequences of their willful rebellion were bitter: moral guilt, the corruption of their human nature, a shattering of God’s image within, immediate spiritual death, eventual physical death, alienation from God, the incurring of his judgment, and expulsion from the garden.

From then on, human nature ceased to be centered on loving God and neighbor and became curved in on itself. Since that time, men and women have been

born into the world alienated from God, and they find themselves spiritually dead, centered on themselves, and wanting to go their own way. Because of their darkened hearts, they willfully sin and ensnare themselves in patterns of behavior that further corrupt the already shattered image of God in their lives. Idolatries develop, leading to compulsive behaviors that become deeply ingrained and difficult to change. The world system, that is, human life organized without reference to God, expresses the values of fallen humanity and reinforces and gives them social sanction. Thus people are blinded to their plight and trapped in their sins. This tragic result of original sin has been at the root of all human misery from that day to this.

Yet all along God has been at work, reaching out to lost people with his grace. Through Abraham, he established a chosen people. And through Moses he delivered them from bondage and gave them “a land flowing with milk and honey.” Through priests and prophets he called Israel to trust him (faith) and when they strayed to turn back to him (repent), receive his forgiveness, love him wholeheartedly and obey his good commands (commitment), and enjoy his blessings. With steadfast love and faithfulness, he blessed them with his grace. Some responded in faith and loving obedience. But the majority either succumbed to the idolatrous, immoral pagan culture around them (as many nominal “Christians” are doing today) or reacted to it with a form of holiness that degenerated into moralistic self-righteousness (as others are doing).

True Conversion

Into such a world, filled with sin, suffering, sorrow and death, came Jesus of Nazareth. He came not to make bad people good but to make dead people alive! He came to “deliver his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). He was “Immanuel, God with us” (Matt. 1:23), who came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). His mission was reflected in his message. John the Baptist announced it by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). After John was arrested, Jesus began to preach “the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). In him, the reign of God was breaking into the world in a new way with a fresh offer of grace, calling for a radical decision. Obedience to the command to repent and believe was the only acceptable response, for these were the essential requirements for true conversion to Christ and submission to God’s reign.

Today when we hear the words *repent* and *believe*, our tendency is to think we know what they mean. But do we really? In spite of being widely used in the American church, few people undertake a careful word study. As a result, many in the church are confused or misinformed. But help is at hand if we will examine the true biblical meaning of the words and refresh or revise our understanding as needed.

What, then, did Jesus mean by the word *repent*? And how does it apply to us today? The main Greek word translated *repent* in our New Testament means a “change of mind.” That is part of what Jesus meant by this word. However, Jesus was not a Greek but a Jew. And his understanding of repentance grew out of the key Hebrew word for repentance in the Old Testament, which means “to turn.” Through the prophets, God repeatedly spoke to the backslidden Israelites, urging them to repent, that is, to wake up to their sin, humble themselves, and turn back to him and his righteous ways. This call is prominent in the Old Testament and means not only a change of mind, but a turning of the heart back to God, manifested in forsaking sin and embracing obedience.¹ In the New Testament, John the Baptist used the word this same way. Matthew’s Gospel records that John charged the Pharisees to “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (3:8). In other words, they were to demonstrate inner change through outward behavior. In Luke, when the crowd asked for specifics about the shape of repentance, John said, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” To tax collectors, he said, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” And to soldiers, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be content with your wages” (3:10–14).

A vivid and touching depiction of repentance is found in Luke’s account of the prodigal son, who willfully left his father, gave himself to a life of sin and experienced the hard consequences of his choices. When at last “he came to himself,” he recognized how far he had fallen and purposed in his heart to return to his father, confess his sin, and ask for mercy (15:17–20). This is a beautiful picture of repentance and (along with the two parables on repentance that precede it) shows the joy—yes, *joy*—that repentance brings in heaven and in us.

Summarizing, one noted scholar describes repentance in this way:

The New Testament word for repentance means changing one’s mind so that one’s views, values, goals, and ways

are changed and one's whole life is lived differently. The change is radical, both inwardly and outwardly; mind and judgment, will and affections, behavior and life-style, motives and purposes, are all involved. Repenting means starting to live a new life.²

This is what Jesus meant when he called men and women to repent. He was calling people out of darkness and bondage into a life of freedom and joy in the Holy Spirit. And in view of our terrible plight, this is exactly the message we all need. Clearly, the call to repent is an offer of grace, a call to awake to our sin and respond with obedience by turning to Jesus Christ. We must respond to God's offer, but our response is not a "work" that human beings can produce through their own efforts. Only God's grace can enable and produce such a profound turning within a person.

Jesus combined the call to repent with a call to "believe in the gospel." In repentance, one turns *from* something; in believing the gospel, one turns *to* something or, rather, Someone. At the heart of the good news of the coming kingdom or reign of God is Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. Faith in Jesus and his work is essential for a right relationship with God and life in his kingdom. For our salvation is grounded not on what we do, but on what Christ has done for us.

What do we mean by faith? In the Bible, faith involves knowledge, assent, and trust. Faith begins with right *knowledge* about Jesus, as he is presented to us in holy Scripture. Today this would include, at a minimum, his identity as the incarnate Son of God, his death on the cross to pay for sins, and his resurrection from the dead and ascension to heaven. However, such knowledge alone is not enough. One must also give sincere *assent* to their truth and believe that these things are literally true. While knowledge and assent are both essential, they are not sufficient. This may surprise some, but accurate knowledge of Jesus and assent to orthodox beliefs are not sufficient for salvation. James tells us that "The demons believe and tremble" (2:19). No, we must go on to trust ourselves to the object of faith, Jesus Christ the Son of God. Jesus and his work on the cross is the focal point of faith. Thus I must trust that on the cross he gave his life for me, me personally, and that God accepted his sacrifice as a full and complete satisfaction for my sins.

True faith, like repentance, cannot be manufactured from within. It is not simply the fruit of human thought, understanding, emotion, and will, though it includes these. Rather, its origin is in the grace of God, whose Spirit illuminates our minds to the Word, con-

vinces us of its truth and draws us to a living faith in the risen Christ.

In the New Testament, repentance (turning from sin to God) and faith (trusting Christ) are actually different sides of the same coin. They are the negative and positive aspects of conversion to Christ. You never find one without the other, because they are by the nature of the case inseparable. This is evident in Scripture, where we see these terms often appearing together. And in places where only one is used, the other is understood; in some cases, repentance is used to encompass the entirety of conversion, while at other times faith is used.

A significant point to note about the words *repent* and *believe* in Mark 1:15 is that in the Greek text both are present imperative verbs, signifying continuing action. So while there is certainly the initial exercise of both at conversion, when we are saved, in the process of ongoing sanctification there will be a deepening of repentance and faith as we discover the depths of remaining sin and encounter the many challenges of life. In other words, they continue to play a role in the lifelong process of being conformed into the likeness of Christ, restored to the image of God.

This description of repentance and faith is nothing new; it is rooted in the Scriptures and was the message of Jesus, Peter, Paul, the apostles, and saints and scholars throughout the history of the church.

Wholehearted Commitment

Jesus called everyone who would follow him, that is, everyone who would be a true Christian, to a wholehearted commitment to himself. This alone can free us from our enslavement to self and liberate us for joyful obedience to him. We see this in Mark 8:34–38, where he issued a profound challenge to both the crowd gathered around him and to his disciples. Jesus said:

*If **anyone** would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever will save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels* (emphasis added).

A brief overview of the context will help us better understand this much neglected but vitally important passage. Jesus is here addressing two very different audiences. He and his disciples were on a retreat in Caesarea Philippi, a pagan area and center for the worship of the god Pan. The crowds in that region would have been nonbelievers and his words to them pointed out the way of salvation and eternal destiny, as verses 35–38 make clear. This, what Jesus says here applies to all people, not just his disciples.

For his disciples, however, these words were a reminder and further explication of the way of salvation, which they had embarked on when they accepted the invitation to follow him, that is, to become his disciples. This was vital preparation for what they would soon encounter when he would be arrested, falsely charged, and killed. During their retreat they had come to a clearer grasp of Jesus' identity as the Messiah, with Peter boldly declaring, "You are the Christ!" However, there was a problem. Like many others of the day, the disciples' idea of the Messiah was one of a God-empowered leader who would deliver Israel from Roman control and usher in an era of unparalleled blessing. In stark contrast, Jesus told them that he would soon "suffer many things, be rejected by the chief priests and scribes, and be killed" (Mark 8:31). These two ideas were totally incompatible in their minds. They expected a conquering Messiah; a suffering, dying Messiah was unthinkable. They had not understood that the Messiah would come first as a Suffering Servant. If their faith were to withstand the events just ahead, they would have to recognize that they were disciples of a Messiah whose devotion to God meant denying himself and embracing death for a lost and dying world, with all that that implied for their own lives. Ironically, many true Christians are in that same situation today; we find it hard to grasp that we are disciples of the Suffering Servant, whom to follow requires a costly obedience.

What, then, did Jesus mean when he said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me"? The phrase "come after me" was commonly used to refer to following someone as a disciple. But what about "denying" oneself? Today we often use this expression to mean refusing oneself a legitimate pleasure of some sort, for example, giving up sweets during Lent. However, this is *not* what Jesus meant.

Professor F.F. Bruce, one of the greatest evangelical New Testament scholars of the twentieth century, explains, "Denying oneself is not a matter of giving

up something, whether for Lent or the whole of life; it is a decisive saying 'No' to oneself, to one's hopes and plans and ambitions, to one's likes and dislikes, to one's nearest and dearest, for the sake of Christ."³ Another noted New Testament scholar, Professor C.E.B. Cranfield, says it this way, "to deny oneself is to disown, not just one's sins but one's self, to turn away from the idolatry of self-centeredness."⁴ Denying self, then, is not giving up something, it is giving up someone. It is renouncing and turning from one's old self as the center of life and embracing Christ as the new center of one's life. It describes the fundamental shift of allegiance and reorientation of life that occurs at conversion. "This is not self-denial in the current sense of the word, but true conversion, the very first essential of the Christian life," says R.C.H. Lenski.⁵ Likewise, William Hendrickson says, we "must once for all say farewell to the old self, the self as it is apart from regenerating grace."⁶ One must say a decisive "no" to everything that stands in the way of saying a radical "yes" to Christ. In the Greek text, the aorist imperative verb here speaks of this action as a definitive event in one's life. Yet how many people in today's church are even aware that a wholehearted renouncing of self and commitment to Christ lies at the heart of true conversion and daily discipleship? How may have made such a decisive renunciation? Is this perhaps one of the reasons why we see so much self-indulgent, worldly living among believers today and so little authentic Christianity? Only those who have crossed this Rubicon will be able to proceed to the next requirement for following Jesus.

"Taking up one's cross" is another expression we use today to mean something very different from what Jesus intended his hearers to understand. When we speak of having to "bear a cross," we are usually referring to some unpleasant or difficult circumstance with which we have to live. But what Jesus meant was far more demanding. Again, Professor Bruce:

*The sight of a man being taken to the place of public execution was not unfamiliar in the Roman world of that day. Such a man was commonly made to carry the crossbeam, the patibulum, of his cross as he went to his death. That is the picture which Jesus's words would conjure up in the minds of his hearers. If they were not prepared for that outcome to their discipleship, let them change their minds while there was time—but let them first weigh the options in the balances of the kingdom of God: "for whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."*⁷

Jesus was clearly asking those who would follow him to count the cost and commit themselves in advance to give up their very lives if faithfulness to him should require it. Once again, the text has an aorist imperative, speaking of this as a definite event. But how many of us have done this?

Only those who deny themselves and take up their crosses will be able to do the last thing Jesus said: "Follow me." The reason is simple. When we answer the call of Christ, life becomes both easier and harder. It is easier because of the blessings of grace, but harder because we enter an unrelenting combat against our old selves, the fallen world around us, and the schemes of the devil. Faithfully following Christ in this battle is possible only if we wholeheartedly put his will and interests ahead of our own, regardless of the cost. For as long as we retain our personal autonomy and seek to preserve our self-centered interests, we won't be able to submit ourselves to his will when it conflicts with ours. And as long as we value our physical survival more than his glory, we will not be able to stand firm in the face of death. Once we make these decisive commitments, we will encounter challenges that require us to reaffirm them again and again. And we will discover that as we do, they grow deeper and stronger.

What, then, did Jesus mean when he said, "Follow me"? He meant we should obey his commands and seek to walk as he walked, live as he lived. The essence of Jesus' commands and life was loving obedience to God and sacrificial service to one's neighbor, regardless of the personal cost. Thus we are called to follow Jesus' precepts and example by living a life of holy love, striving for that perfection in love that begins in this world and comes to fullness in the world to come where at last the image of God will be fully restored in us.

Such a life seems impossible when we consider our self-centeredness, sins, and weaknesses. And indeed it is impossible apart from grace. But Jesus knows how weak we are, and he has made the impossible possible for us through the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit creates the community of faith to nurture us. The Spirit makes the Word become alive and powerful in us. The Spirit pours out God's love into our hearts. The Spirit enables us joyfully to abandon ourselves to God, to daily put to death the works of our fallen nature, and to be progressively transformed into the likeness of Jesus himself. The Spirit calls us to mission, gifts us for ministry, and enables us to fulfill the works God has prepared us to do for his glory. All these things and more he will do as we earnestly seek to be filled with the Spirit and walk in the Spirit. It

is significant that the Greek verb we render "follow" is not an aorist but a present imperative, indicating continuing action. That is, Jesus asks us to follow him faithfully day by day to our life's end.

He knows, of course, that we will not do it perfectly. Throughout our lives we will encounter temptations, trials, resistance, and persecution. And there will be times when we stumble and fall, sometimes tragically. When we do, it drives us back to the cross in repentance for our sin and in faith that the blood he shed for us saves to the uttermost. He who could forgive Peter, who denied him, will surely do no less for us. Then, like Peter, forgiven, restored and humbled, we march on with fresh hope and renewed commitment.

What Jesus teaches about true conversion and wholehearted commitment is not something most American church-goers will want to hear. As James Houston once observed, "Most church members don't want growth, they want to remain comfortably asleep." As a result, this is not something most preachers will want to address, since it will definitely "rock the boat" and might lead to reduce attendance and giving. But it is something we desperately need to hear again from the pulpits of our land.

Whenever individuals and churches have lost sight of these realities, the effects have been devastating on personal life, congregational life and the reputation of the church before the watching world. And that is where we are today. The greatest problem in the church at this time is that so many Christians have such a shallow grasp and experience of these transforming truths. But when these blessed truths have been recovered, it has led to personal revival, church renewal, and evangelistic fruitfulness. Such a recovery is what we desperately need today.

Conclusion

In this article, we have simply tried to restate the obvious: in laying down his life for us, and calling us to true conversion and wholehearted commitment, Jesus Christ is urging us to turn from a self-centered life that is the fruit of the Fall and to turn to himself and the God-centered life of the world to come. It is a call to a life of grace in all its fullness, freedom, and joy, a call to the only kind of life that will matter in the end. And the response he desires comes not from guilt, fear, idealism, or heroism, but from humble, grateful obedience, freely given out of love for him who loved us and gave himself up for us, and who said, "If you love me, you will obey me" (John 14:15).

Notes

1. See the commentaries: William Hendricksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, 56–58; William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, 63–66; James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 45–48; R.C.H. Lenski, *St. Mark's Gospel*, 65–67; C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 68, 44–45.

2. J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1995), 162.

3. F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 152.

4. C.E.B Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1959), 281.

5. R.C.H. Lenski, *St. Mark's Gospel*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), 348.

6. William Hendricksen, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 329.

7. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, 151.

Tom Tarrants is Director of Ministry at the C.S. Lewis Institute. He has lived in the Washington, D.C. area since 1978 and served as President of the C.S. Lewis Institute from 1998 to April 2010. Prior to coming to the Institute, he served as Co-Pastor of Christ Our Shepherd Church in Washington, D.C. Tom earned his Doctor of Ministry from Fuller Theological Seminary and is an ordained Minister in the Evangelical Church Alliance.

© 2010 C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE
8001 Braddock Road, Suite 301 • Springfield, VA 22151
703/914-5602
www.cslewisinstitute.org

C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE
Discipleship of Heart and Mind

◆ ◆ ◆
*In the legacy of C.S. Lewis,
the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can
articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ
through personal and public life.*

