

# “Reimagining” Conversion

## From Evangelical Revivalism to Emerging Ecumenicalism

**But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any *man* preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.** Paul, Galatians 1:8-9, KJV

### Introduction

In that an aggregate of scholars, leaders and authors of the emerging church movement have been and are continuing to redefine Protestant and evangelical teaching regarding salvation (i.e., the atonement, justification and reconciliation), it should come as no surprise that the very meaning of conversion is now being re-envisioned or re-imagined. As an article recently posted on the *Christianity Today* website says,

It is not an overstatement to say that evangelicals are experiencing a “sea change”—a paradigm shift—in their understanding of conversion and redemption, a shift that includes the way in which they think about the salvation of God, the nature and mission of the church, and the character of religious experience. Although there is no one word to capture where evangelicals are going in this regard, there is a word that captures what they are leaving behind: revivalism. [1]

At the outset let it be stated that, as it became institutionalized in the American evangelical subculture during the 20th century, evangelical revivalism—defined as the “accept-Jesus” invitational system which includes such methods as altar calls involving raising a hand and walking an aisle, or accepting spiritual laws and then praying a “receive-Jesus” prayer—is not without problems when subjected the biblical template of conversion. [2] Over the last few decades revivalism has been criticized, even by “in house” evangelicals. [3] As critics of the revivalistic system point out, in the aftermath of such point-in-time conversions, long term spiritual fruit has often not been evident, despite concerted efforts at follow-up and discipleship.

But now within evangelicalism a new paradigm of conversion is emerging, a paradigm that places emphasis on baptism, spiritual formation, community and kingdom building on earth. As opposed to the old revivalism with its emphasis on *becoming a Christian*, the new paradigm of conversion emphasizes *being a Christian* (To this distinction, the New Testament’s emphasis upon both becoming and being a Christian can be noted, the emphasis upon the one not to exclude the other; See John 3:3, 7; Galatians 5:22-24; James 2:17; 1 John 3:17.).

To understand this “sea change” regarding the old revivalistic paradigm of conversion, the emerging church’s emphasis appears to be upon togetherness, discipleship and kingdom. As advocates express it, “Belong, then believe.” Or as they assess the real membership of the church, “Most are in, and few (if any) are out.” Thus in their eyes, the church ought to be, as

much as possible, one ecumenical community—“Kumbaya, my Lord, Kumbaya!”

But hindrances exist to the realization of community, hindrances involving essential biblical and Protestant teachings (Remember, the heart of the word Protestant is the word “protest.”). So in order to induce feelings of “togetherness,” there’s a movement adrift to deconstruct and then redefine those essential Reformation teachings that pose barriers to building community. In order to reach a consensus of faith which most, if not all Christians, can agree on, core beliefs concerning the Cross must be altered. Key teachings (i.e., doctrines which are to be believed) must be re-imagined or re-envisioned to fit a “community” template, especially as they regard the atonement, justification, reconciliation and finally, the very meaning of conversion itself. Amidst the “sea change” engulfing evangelicalism, we now give attention to the re-envisioning that is going on with these crucial doctrines in order to make them fit a togetherness template.

### **Togetherness and the Atonement**

One can’t experience “togetherness” if in the present spiritual reality, it is held that some persons are accepted by God while others remain estranged from Him; in other words, while some are “in,” others are “out.” Thus, as a penal substitutionary atonement for sin, Jesus’ death needs to be deconstructed in order to fit the community template. For togetherness to exist, it cannot be held that some persons’ sins have been forgiven while others’ have not. That by faith the spiritual benefits of Jesus’ substitutionary atonement might be appropriated by some, but in unbelief rejected by others, violates any spirit of community. So in a book endorsed by emergent Christian leader Brian McLaren, the Dean of San Francisco’s Grace Cathedral, Alan Jones, writes in his book *Reimagining Christianity*:

The Church’s fixation on the death of Jesus as the universal saving act must end, and the place of the cross must be reimagined in the Christian faith. Why? Because of the cult of suffering and the vindictive God behind it. [4]

Then later, in a context of mentioning Jesus’ “sacrifice,” Jones adds: “Penal substitution was the name of this vile doctrine.” [5]

In another book endorsed by N.T. Wright, Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo, emergent church leader Steve Chalke writes:

The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offense he has committed. *Understandably, both people inside and outside the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith.* [6]

As the last sentence of the above quote indicates, the penal substitutionary understanding of Jesus’ Cross is viewed as an obstacle to unity to those both inside and outside the church. But if He did not die “for” the sin(s) of persons, a begging question remains: Why did Jesus die? Out of necessity, any explanation of Jesus’ death on the cross must turn to either the moral influence (Jesus died to provide a selfless and influential example for others to follow) or

*Christus Victor* (by His death Jesus conquered the world's evil "principalities and powers") theories of the atonement. Thus, when confronted with real life situations which present choices between the gratification of either self or others, Christians will follow Jesus' example (WWJD—what would Jesus do?), and sacrifice themselves for the welfare of others, even at their own expense, discomfort, disadvantage, and possibly death. [7] Or when confronted by societal ills and abuses caused by evil "**rulers and authorities**" (Colossians 2:15, NASB), Christians, in their attempt to build God's kingdom on earth, will therefore stand against and fight the forces of an abusive patriarchy, poverty, consumerism, militarism, racism, super-patriotism, world hunger and more. [8]

In contrast to those in denial of or discomfited by the doctrine of Jesus' substitutionary atonement for sin, we can only note Paul's statement in Galatians that, "**Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree**" (Galatians 3:13). In quoting the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 21:23), Paul explains that Jesus' death was both *penal*—Christ "**redeemed us from the curse of the law**"—and *substitutionary*—He was "**made a curse for us.**" If this statement by the apostle means anything, it means that Jesus death was a penal, a substitutionary, and an atonement for sin.

Yes, by His life and in His death Jesus provides a selfless example for others to follow. Yes, by His death Jesus triumphed over demonic "**principalities and powers**" (Colossians 2:15, KJV) who influence the world's system. But born of divine love, the Father invested the Son's death with greater cosmic significance than just that. God's Son also died in the place of sinners, "**for**" our sins (Romans 4:25; 2 Corinthians 5:21). He bore the punishment we deserve. As the hymn writer put it:

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
 In my place He stood—  
 Sealed my pardon with His blood;  
 Hallelujah, what a Savior! [9]

Yet in an emergent-ecumenical view of community, the idea of Jesus' penal substitutionary atonement opposes feelings of unity. For if men are separated from God—and Scripture states that can be the case (Spoke the prophet: "**But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear,**" Isaiah 59:2, KJV.)—it stands to reason they will discover, either for reason of belief or unbelief, that they are separated from one another. And such division Jesus stated would occur (See Matthew 10:32-36; 25:31-43; etc.). So emergent Christians are rallying around the moral influence view of the atonement by which they can feel "at-one-ment" with others, or a *Christus Victor* view of the atonement around which they can unite in their fight against societal ills and evils in order to build God's kingdom now.

## Together and Justification

J.I. Packer notes that, "The doctrine of justification" was "the storm center of the Reformation . . ." [10] "Justification is" as Packer defines, "a judicial act of God pardoning sinners (wicked and ungodly persons, Rom. 4:5; 3:9-24), accepting them as just, and so putting permanently right their previously estranged relationship with himself." [11] Justification may be defined as that moment when by faith, God imparts to the believer a righteous standing before Him like unto that of Jesus, God's eternal Son (Compare Matthew 3:17; 17:5.). In justification by faith, God exonerates believers of real moral guilt for sins committed (i.e., not just guilt feelings).

Critics of forensic justification label God's "not-guilty-pardoning" of sinners as a "legal fiction." Though such a charge might be relevant if justification were a heavenly occurrence only, it becomes irrelevant when it is understood that justification is relevant to living life on earth. The understanding that after being declared "Not guilty!" by the Judge of Heaven the justified do not pursue the same sinful lifestyle they did before conversion mutes such criticism (See 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.). A genuine faith that justifies cannot be separated from good and godly works that evidence it (See James 2:14-26.).

Justification provides no license (i.e., licentiousness) for the pardoned to go back to the sinful pursuits they enjoyed before God justified them (in criminal parlance, this is called *recidivism*). If there is no appreciable change in life when a person gets supposedly "saved" according to the revivalistic paradigm, then such a point-in-time experience might be labeled "legal fiction." But Paul tells believers to lay "**aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit**" and "**put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth**" (Ephesians 4:22-24, NASB). A *putting on of the new self* by believers shows that the "Not Guilty!" verdict over their lives possesses more reality than being just "legal fiction."

After justification, the Holy Spirit begins His work of sanctification in the believer's life (i.e., believers become righteous). On a day-to-day basis, justification will evidence itself in the life of believers they persevere in righteous living until they are glorified in Heaven (Romans 8:29-30). As John describes those true believers who in their perseverance will refuse to receive the idolatrous mark of the beast: "**Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus**" (Revelation 14:12, NASB).

**Note:** On this point, it must be noted that justification and sanctification are not the same, that these two aspects of salvation are not to be confused or mixed. There are no works Christians do, whether before or after conversion, or whether for reason of God imparting righteousness unto or infusing righteousness into them, which contribute to their justification by God (Such co-working is called synergism, or people doing good works to help God to save them.). In total, justification is God's work and declaration.

As with Abraham, *justification in Scripture is personal*. In reference to Christianity's forerunner, the Apostle Paul wrote: "**For what saith the scripture? Abraham [not *they*] believed God, and it was counted unto him [not *them*] for righteousness [i.e., justification]**" (Romans 4:3; See Genesis 15:6; Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; 4:9, 22; Galatians 3:6, 11; Hebrews 10:38; James 2:23.).

But such a biblical and Reformation understanding of justification is now being altered to fit a community or togetherness template. Without engaging the sophisticated arguments surrounding "the new justification," arguments with which average Christians are not concerned, the contemporary understanding of justification now advocates that justification involves a declaration or recognition that a person "is in" or "belongs to" the covenant family. Accordingly, "righteousness" is simply a statement of that person's being in community. He or she is not regarded as morally virtuous (whether through imputed, imparted or infused righteousness), but is simply declared to be in the community. Cornelius P. Venema, President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, assesses the new version of justification, espoused by E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn and N.T. Wright, and now believed by many within the emergent church movement, as follows: "Justification does not describe how someone gains entrance into the community of God's people but who is a member of the community now and in the future." [12]

So while according to Paul and the "old" reformers justification concerns our legal or forensic standing before God (i.e., declared, "Not guilty!"), the "new" reformers view justification to be a sacramentally conferred and an ecclesiastical "belonging" to the Christian community.

But as with Abraham, any communal experience of justification is predicated upon people first being justified on a personal basis; for after all, any group must be constituted of individuals to be a group. As Venema reminds:

The gospel of free justification and acceptance with God continues to speak with freshness and power to all human beings who need to know where they stand with God. Because of the saving work of Jesus Christ on their behalf, believers may be joyfully confident that there is 'now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 8:1). [13]

But again, that idea that some individuals are "not guilty" while others remain "guilty" poses a barrier to the development of togetherness. It must be remembered that Jesus announced there would be spiritual division, a division He compared to the final separation of the "sheep" from the "goats" (Matthew 25:31-46; Compare Matthew 7:22-23; 10:34-36.).

## **Togetherness and Reconciliation**

### *Universal Reconciliation in "The Shack"*

Reconciliation means a change in "relationship." [14] The need for reconciliation presupposes estrangement between two parties (Matthew 5:23-24). Whereas they became enemies, two parties become friends again. Often, reconciliation needs to occur between humans, between friends, spouses, races, tribes, and nations. But reconciliation also needs to take place between people and God. Though Paul stated that the Colossians were "reconciled," he noted that in their pre-converted state they had been spiritually "alienated" from God for reason of their rebellion against Him (Colossians 1:21-22). As such, the doctrine of reconciliation lies at the center of the Christian faith. As White remarks, "Since a right relationship with God is the heart of all religion, reconciliation, which makes access welcome and fellowship possible, may be regarded as the central concept in Christianity." [15] But again, like the atonement and justification, the biblical teaching on reconciliation presents a barrier to togetherness because

while by faith some persons choose to become reconciled to God, others, in their unbelief and their pursuit of ungodly living, choose to remain estranged from Him.

To counteract feelings that arise from the reconciled/un-reconciled divide, liberal evangelicals propose a doctrine of universal reconciliation; that on the basis of unqualified divine love exhibited in Jesus' death and resurrection, God has reconciled Himself to the whole of humanity. As God (*Papa-Elousia*) states to Mack in *The Shack*, "Honey, you asked me what Jesus did on the cross; so now listen to me carefully: through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world." [16]

Again, in a comfortable, schmoozing, and relational atmosphere of *The Shack*, in a conversation Mack has with that allegory's hermaphroditic deity about the Canadian rock musician Bruce Cockburn, *Papa-Elousia* says to Mack, "Mackenzie, I have no favorites; I am just especially fond of him." Mack then responds, "You seem to be especially fond of a lot of people . . . Are there any who you are not especially fond of?" After pensively contemplating the question, Papa responds, "Nope, I haven't been able to find any. Guess that's jes' the way I is." [17] Bingo! God is as "fond" of villains like Judas, Nero, Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and Osama bin Laden as He is of Jesus. It's all one big "circle of relationship" (*Kumbaya!*). As Papa later tells Mack, "In Jesus, I have forgiven all human beings for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship." [18]

According to the theological scheme of universal reconciliation, it's not that sinners need to be reconciled to God, but rather that, by His initiative (Jesus' sacrifice) arising out of divine love (Jesus' resurrection), God becomes reconciled to humanity, en masse. In such a reconciliation scenario, if offenses (i.e., sins) have been committed, one is forced to conclude that God, nor man, has been the offending party! He is the One who needs to be reconciled to sinners. This is the reverse of the New Testament teaching.

#### *Universalism in "Love Wins"*

In his book *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, and in a spirit of "togetherness," Rob Bell, denies any reality of Hell in the afterlife. [19] Proposing his version of universalism, the book's back jacket cover contains a picture of Bell speaking and a caption containing these words:

"God loves us. God offers us everlasting life by grace, freely, through no merit on our part. Unless you do not respond the right way. Then God will torture you forever. In hell." *Huh?*

But any belief in universalism can't be reconciled with the angel's statement about the fate awaiting unbelievers who idolatrously worship the beast, their allegiance to him having been signified by receiving his mark. John records his vision:

**And another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or upon his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed**

**in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. “And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”** (Revelation 14:9-11, NASB)

Universalism is also impossible to reconcile with Jesus’ judgment upon Judas whom He called, “**the son of perdition**” (John 17:12; Compare 2 Thessalonians 2:3.), and about whom He stated, “**it had been good for that man if he had not been born**” (Matthew 26:24). [20] William S. Plumer (1759-1850, New Hampshire lawyer, politician and Bible scholar, commented that “The doctrine of universal salvation has no countenance in Scripture.” After stating there is much in Scripture contradicting universalism, Plumer goes on to say:

It is disproven by the case of Judas. If, after many thousand years of suffering, he shall rise to everlasting happiness in the skies, it will be good for him that he was born. Eternal happiness far outweighs all temporal suffering, however protracted. Any existence which terminates in eternal glory will prove a blessing beyond all computation. All temporal suffering can be gauged. But who can fathom the sea of love, the ocean of bliss, made sure to all believers? And eternal misery is as dreadful as eternal glory is desirable. Oh! how fearful must be the doom of the incorrigibly wicked, when in their case existence itself ceases to be desirable, or even tolerable! It is true of every one who dies without repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, that—“It had been good for that man if he had not been born.” [21]

To this point, sometime ago I viewed a cable TV talk show (*The O’Reilly Factor*) in which the host—in the context of the controversy aroused with the publication of Bell’s book—interviewed a pastor and psychologist-counselor who believed in universal salvation; that in the afterlife, there will be no eternal reality in a place called Hell. The dialog took place as follows:

*Pastor McKinney:* “No, I don’t believe in a literal Hell. I think it’s a historical and theological mistake.”

*Bill O’Reilly:* “Do you believe in a literal Heaven?”

*McKinney:* “Ah (smiling contentedly and assuredly), I do!”

*O’Reilly:* “Okay, so that means you’re going to see Adolph [Hitler] up there. Say hello to him for me, ’cause I got to tell you, I don’t want to be anywhere near him.” [22]

As evident from that exchange, the idea of universal reconciliation flies in the face of any sense of fair play, something that people’s consciences bear corporate witness to, their “**thoughts [either] accusing or else excusing one another**” (Romans 2:15).

Often those who don’t, for reason of God’s love, believe in Hell, condescendingly censure those who do believe in Hell—with questions like, “What kind of loving God is that, a God who would punish people in Hell forever and ever? Is that your kind of God?” Well, in light of

universalism's belief that all the villains of history will wind up in Heaven right along side the innocent victims against whom they perpetrated their genocidal crimes against humanity and God, let's reverse the question: "Do you believe in a God like that? Doesn't your God possess any sense of fair play? Is there no ultimate justice in the universe?"

You see, by casting the idea of an everlasting Hell to be beneath the dignity of a loving God does not solve the problem of God's character. If in His justice God must deal with the greater villains of history, then that dealing will necessitate that He deal with the lesser villains of history, and that, absent His grace, could include me and you, "**For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God**" (Romans 3:23). If God is just, and He is, and absent His grace (giving us what we do not deserve), then He can only assign all the villains of history to a place of eternal confinement, a place of "**outer darkness**" where "**there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth**" (Matthew 25:30; See Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). On the point of justice, persons who in this life flout the rules of God to the injury of themselves and those around them, universalism appears to be grossly unfair. The reprobate and unrepentant villains don't get what they deserve.

But the doctrines of atonement, justification and reconciliation/salvation are not the only ones drifting in "sea change." Their change now necessitates that the understanding of conversion needs "change," and according to the evangelical mouthpiece *Christianity Today*, it too is now being "reenvisioned."

### **Togetherness and Conversion**

According to Gordon T. Smith, the revivalistic paradigm of conversion (as noted at the beginning of this article), a paradigm rooted amongst the 17th century Puritans, then stemming out of the revivalists of 18th – 19th centuries (Edwards, Wesley, Whitfield, Finney, Moody), and finally institutionalized in the American evangelical subculture during the 20th century (Sunday, Graham, Bright), is being "left behind" (perhaps in reference to the best-selling series of prophetic novels that have become symptomatic of the same evangelical subculture). [23] Smith notes this shift appears to be affected by a number of emerging influences upon evangelicalism. [24]

From the biblical studies of scholars like James Dunn, N.T. Wright and others, emergent evangelicals "are being weaned from their propensity to make a one-to-one correlation between conversion and 'getting saved'." [25] From the studies of philosophers, behavioral scientists, developmental theorists and anthropologists, evangelicals' understanding "of the nature of religious experience" is being informed. [26] From other Christian traditions (i.e., Orthodox, Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant) core evangelical convictions are undergoing "cross-pollination." [27] From the impact of global Pentecostalism, evangelicals are awakening to the role of the Spirit which "must find expression in the tangible . . . pursuit of peace and justice, and identification with the poor." [28] And from the recovery of "their full Christian heritage," evangelicals are going back to Christianity's pre-revivalistic roots, a heritage informed in part from "the breadth of medieval and 16th-century Spanish mysticism." [29]

As one reads Smith's assessment, the frequency of the occurrence of the word "experience" can be noted (I count twenty-three times.). As he explains,

Increasingly, there is appreciation that conversion is a *complex experience* by which a person is initiated into a common life with the people of God who together seek the in-breaking of the kingdom, both in this life and in the world to come. This *experience* is mediated by the church and thus necessarily includes baptism as a rite of initiation. [30]

Assuming Smith's assessment to be accurate, what becomes noticeable is that within the emerging church ritualistic mechanisms—called means of grace—become the paradigm by which to measure conversion. [31] Whereas with the old revivalistic paradigm emphasized altar calls and the sinner's prayer as indicators of conversion, the new ecclesiastical paradigm employs mechanisms of grace that include "baptism as a rite of initiation" into the community of faith by which rite the "power or energy" of an "immediate encounter with the risen Christ" becomes experienced. [32]

Without engaging the biblical and theological arguments regarding the meaning and ministration baptism, it may be noted that in the New Testament faith always precedes the rite of baptism (Acts 8:37, KJV). Baptism is not a mechanism by which the church administers a dynamic experiential entrance into the kingdom community. In the New Testament baptism followed but did not precede faith. Baptism is the evidence, not the substance, of conversion.

But the irony of the shift away from the revivalistic paradigm on the part of emergent evangelicals is that even as they are leaving behind the old indicators of conversion (i.e., altar calls, decision cards, giving your life to Jesus, etc.) they seem to be embracing new ones (i.e., baptism, spiritual formation—the disciplines of which they often equate with discipleship—church membership, kingdom work, etc.). For some reason, Christians, whatever their tradition—whether it be evangelical, emergent, Orthodox or Roman Catholic—seem fascinated by rites and works (sacraments and mechanisms) which are thought to provide indication that God is at work in their community. But then Jesus did warn, "**An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign**" (Matthew 12:39; Compare 1 Corinthians 1:22.).

## Conclusion

As they are leaving behind the old revivalism of the 17th-20th centuries, evangelicals appear to be drifting in a "sea change" which can only be hazily defined. Though a word describes what emergent evangelicals are leaving behind (i.e., revivalism), no one word describes "where evangelicals are going." [33] Their destiny remains uncertain. But perhaps, in light of trends this essay notes, there are a couple of words that can describe where emergent evangelicals are headed; *ecumenical* and *ecclesiastical*. As they re-imagine their faith, even as they embrace wide varieties of religious experience and cross-pollinate with Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, liberal Protestant and medieval-mystic traditions, *evangelicals are becoming increasingly ecumenical*. As they re-envision their faith and embrace baptism and other signs and seals of conversion (i.e., sacraments), *evangelicals are becoming increasingly ecclesiastical*. Conversion is no longer primarily seen as a person's one-to-one experience with God, but rather is being re-envisioned to include an ecclesiastical and missional template in which life together, spiritual formation and kingdom building can be pursued. In this regard, evangelicals and Catholics have been and are continuing to seek common cause as they confront many of America's social and political ills. [34]

Though Smith disavows that anything in his assessment (advocacy?) diminishes evangelicalism's core belief—what he calls experiencing conversion through “faith and repentance” and “the transforming grace of God through an encounter with the risen and ascended Christ”—there should be concern that, as revivalistic evangelicalism is being left behind and conversion is being re-envisioned or re-imagined, *the Gospel is being reinvented* (See Galatians 1:6-9.). Given Paul's disdain for the early Jewish-Christian advocacy of circumcision to be a sign and seal of conversion, the drift of evangelicals into ecumenicalism and ecclesiasticism (most noticeable in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox faith traditions) may evidence they have fallen and are falling “**from grace**” (Galatians 5:4; 4:21-5:12).

For all passengers and crew members aboard the emerging church, it will be tragic if, absent any mooring to the Gospel, they get lost in “sea change,” get “**tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine,**” and perhaps even suffer “**shipwreck in regard to their faith**” (Ephesians 4:14, KJV; 1 Timothy 1:18-19, NASB).

Recognizing the inadequacy of most definitions, I would like to close by offering my understanding of what Scripture teaches about conversion and community:

For reason of Jesus Christ's substitutionary death on the cross for their sin, conversion commences when by faith individuals are justified by accepting God's gracious gift of His righteousness to replace their sinfulness, which divine gift, sourced in the Lord Jesus Christ's resurrection from the dead, imparts eternal life to them through regeneration and Holy Spirit baptism; which baptism, even as it places them into union with Christ and His church (later symbolized by the ordinance of believer's baptism by immersion), also empowers believers to live in community with one another even as the Holy Spirit enables them to conform their lifestyles to the righteous standards of Scripture. (See 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13; Romans 10:9; John 10:28; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 6:3-6; Galatians 5:22-25; Romans 8:29-30.)

## ENDNOTES

[1] Gordon T. Smith, “The New Conversion: Why We ‘Become Christians’ Differently Today,” *Christianity Today*, April 18, 2012 (Web-only).

([http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article\\_print.html?id=96130](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=96130)). With the permission of Oxford University Press, Inc., Christianity Today excerpted Smith's article (pp. 209-213 & pp. 219-220) from his entry (Chapter 13), “Conversion and Redemption,” *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, Gerald R. McDermott, Editor (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010): 209-221.

[2] See Larry DeBruyn, “The Altar Call,” *Guarding His Flock Ministries*, August 31, 2010. (<http://guardinghisflock.com/2010/08/31/the-altar-call/#more-1328>).

[3] See Ray Comfort, *God Has a Wonderful Plan for Your Life: The Myth of the Modern Message* (Bellflower, CA: Living Waters Publications, 2010). John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He Says, “Follow Me”?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988) and *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1993).

- [4] Alan Jones, *Reimagining Christianity: Reconnect Your Spirit without Disconnecting Your Mind* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005): 132. McLaren's Advance Praise reads: "Alan Jones is a pioneer in reimagining a Christian faith that emerges from authentic spirituality. His work stimulates and encourages me deeply." (Back Cover)  
Interestingly, if Christianity now needs "reimagining," then it must be asked, "Are we to think that the Christian faith was imagined in the beginning?" As such, is involvement with the Christian faith no more significant than a Disney World visit? Is the essence of Christianity no more significant than a personal trip into recesses of one's mind, whether conscious or subconscious?
- [5] Ibid: 168.
- [6] Emphasis added, Steve Chalke with Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003): 182. Endorsers include not only N.T. Wright, but also Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo. (Back Cover)
- [7] For a more in depth discussion of "the moral influence view of the atonement," see the chapter "The Shack and Universal Reconciliation." Pastor Larry DeBruyn, *Unshackled: Breaking Away from Seductive Spirituality* (Indianapolis, IN: Moeller Printing Company, Inc., 2009): 88-92.
- [8] Richard Mouw, "Why Christus Victor Is Not Enough," *Christianity Today* (May 2012): 28. The *Christus Victor* understanding of the atonement views that Jesus accepted powerlessness in His confrontation with "the political, economic, military, and religious forces of the day," and as such, "refused to employ the coercive-violent means by which . . . to 'make things happen.'" The Resurrection, on this understanding, is God's display of the victory of Jesus over the powers and what they represent." (p. 30)
- [9] Philip P. Bliss, "Hallelujah, What a Savior!" *The Celebration Hymnal: Songs and Hymns for Worship*, Tom Fettke, Senior Editor (Word/Integrity, 1997): 311.
- [10] J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993): 164
- [11] Ibid.
- [12] Cornelius P. Venema, *Getting the Gospel Right: Assessing the Reformation and New Perspectives on Paul* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006):48. See also Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul: A Review and Response* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004): 148.
- [13] Ibid: 90.
- [14] R.E.O. White, "Reconciliation," *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Edited by Walter A. Elwell, Abridged by Peter Toon (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991): 420. Morris determined that, "The basic idea of reconciliation is that of making peace after a quarrel, or bridging over an enmity." See Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965): 250.
- [15] White, "Reconciliation," 421.
- [16] Wm. Paul Young, *The Shack* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007): 192.
- [17] Ibid: 118-119.
- [18] Ibid: 225. Emphasis added.
- [19] Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York, NY: Harper One, 2011) xi + 198 pages.
- [20] For a biblical critique of Bell's view of Hell set forth in his book *Love Wins*, see "Love Loses" by Pastor Larry DeBruyn, May 9, 2011, *Guarding His Flock Ministries*. (<http://guardinghisflock.com/2011/05/09/love-loses/#more-1774>).

[21] William S. Plumer, "Lessons from the Life and End of Judas Iscariot," *True Gospel Resources*. (<http://www.truegospel.net/Plumer/001.htm>).

[22] Personally transcribed from You Tube, Bill O'Reilly, "Is there a Hell?" *O'Reilly Factor*, April 26, 2011. Interview can be viewed on You Tube. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-ljuXSoGrk>).

[23] Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995). In all, the series of novels dealing with end times' themes numbers twelve, the last, *Glorious Appearing*, being published in 2004.

[24] Because we think that in his assessment Smith has his hand on the pulse of "sea change" sweeping over evangelicalism, his articulation of it must be biblically interacted with.

[25] Smith, "The New Conversion."

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid. Emphasis added.

[31] Personally, I do not object to "means of grace" as they designate ways to enhance growth in the Christian life (i.e., baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayer, Bible reading, church commitment, sharing the Gospel with the non-Christian). However, as the "means of grace" denote, as they often do in both the Reformed, Orthodox and Roman Catholic faith traditions, sacraments by which persons gain entrance into and remain in the kingdom of God must be rejected for these means of grace do not reflect grace at all, but works (like that of Jewish circumcision, Galatians 5:2-12). Such "means of grace" parades as part of the Gospel but in reality belong to a gospel of a different kind than that preached by Paul and the other apostles (Galatians 1:6-9).

[32] Smith, "The New Conversion."

[33] Ibid.

[34] For the original statement and list of signatory participants in and endorsers of the document, see "Evangelicals & Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," *First Things*, May 1994.

(<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/evangelicals--catholics-together-the-christian-mission-in-the-third-millennium-2>). The founding editor having been John Richard Neuhaus, the *First Things* blog is maintained by "The Institute on Religion and Public Life, an interreligious, nonpartisan research and education institute whose purpose is to advance a religiously informed public philosophy for the ordering of society." See also Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, *Your Word Is Truth: A Project of Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Inc., 2002).