



Worship: Conversion

Ephesians 5:15-20

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Worship is a primary focus for the community of faith. Worship is, in part, a time for us as the people of God to be gathered as a joint exercise in acknowledging, praising, and listening to the word and will of God for the world. Yet, I think that in our cultural climate we've distorted worship. In the framework of consumerism and individualism, which defines our society, we've tried to make worship into a self-satisfying set-apart hour of the week, in which we find ourselves seeking personal affirmation and lifestyle authorization.

I fear that for many, the act of Christian worship is little more than a sought-after time of support to maintain the status quo of our daily living. We long for someone to tell us that we're doing it right, and that we can just keep swimming in the same direction and path we've been swimming.

Were the world working in the vision of humanity that the apostle lays out in Ephesians, chapters 1-3, perhaps worship could be so maintenance, or affirmation, focused.

The apostle, in writing the letter to the Ephesians, lays out a grand vision of who we are as a created people because of God's work in Jesus Christ. This vision centers the unity of creation – offering a new humanity in which the divisions of the past are no more, but through which all of humanity works in a shared body to partake in the fulfillment of God's vision for creation.

Yet, this vision is not a present reality. This hoped for unity does not exist in practice, not even within the walls of most church buildings. So we must listen to the teaching of the apostle, which does not call for worship to be an idle time of self-affirmation, but instead a participatory time of self-relegation to the vision and will of God.

We have been considering over the past month how this apostle's writing to the Ephesians invites us to better understand the focus of worship. Regardless of how, or when, or where we worship, we're invited to see worship as a time of praise, prayer, and peace, being involved in the work of unity and confession. And, because our life in practice is not as God would desire, something we can own because of our invitation last Sunday to confession and speaking the truth, today, the apostle invites worship to be a time of conversion.

For many churches, the invitation to conversion is about making a public declaration – a visible dedication of one's life to Jesus Christ. The United Methodist Church invites such a profession when we receive new members – like we celebrated last Sunday the reception of the Lawson family who joined the church as part of our afternoon communion service. We invite a public statement of faith – a profession of belief in Jesus Christ as Lord.

This conversion is meant to be a process, not a singular moment. Yet, many church bodies believe in such a simple one-time response. I remember some years back, I was serving as a youth director for a church in southwest Virginia. I had taken the youth group to a conference over the winter holidays near Gatlinburg, Tennessee. During one of the worship services, the speaker invited any of the youth in the room who had not dedicated their life to Jesus to stand up and come forward to pray with one of the leaders of the conference. They were there invited to accept Jesus as Lord, to pray the Jesus prayer, and to, in that moment, make a public declaration that they were a Jesus follower, which was offered to them as a once-and-done deal.

Some churches call this moment a salvation moment, or the moment of being “saved.” Indeed, there are many churches who post on their social media accounts each weekend how many “salvations” were received during worship.

I struggle some with the language of this singular conversion primarily because, as we’ve been studying Ephesians, we’ve read that it is by the grace of God we are saved. Going back to Ephesians 2, we find in verse 8, “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – but not of you – as a gift of God.” The text seems to indicate our salvations are not just now received because of some personal decision, but that our salvation has been long before secured.

But more importantly, I don’t think the invitation to change – the invitation to faith – this conversion is a once-and-done ordeal. It feels a bit hocus-pocus to assume that I can, in any one moment of my life, make a statement that says I am exactly who God would have me to be, and now my eternal claim is assured and I am have no further room for growth. As we read in today’s text, the invitation of the apostle is to enjoin in an ongoing, repetitive, regular process of renewal through worship. Perhaps a momentary profession is helpful, but it’s certainly not final for those who seek faithfulness to the Word of God.

As we’ve named about this letter to the Ephesians, the first three chapters offer a theological promise through an elongated prayer. There is a definitive statement made about who we are as a unified people because of God’s work through Jesus Christ. Beginning in chapter 4, we find a shift from a theological promise to moral statement – or perhaps better stated, a practice-oriented imperative. *Because* of the promise made in the first three chapters, the next three chapters define how we *are to* be living. That is, there is a life that existed prior to our knowledge of God in Christ, and there is a different life that results from the knowledge we have of God through Jesus Christ.

Here in chapter 5, the apostle is continuing to tell us about this new life. These verses are not offered as “*should*” statements – they are not *invitational*. These are *imperatives*. These are definitive proclamations for one whose life is living in the promise made in the first three chapters – a promise that states we *are unified* through the love of God in Jesus Christ.

As verse 15 begins, we read in the New Revised Standard Version, “Be careful how you live.” The word translated as *live* comes from the Greek word *peripateō* (pear-ee-pah-tay-o). In most of its uses in the

Greek New Testament, the word is translated as *walk*. This verse, more aptly then, begins, “Be careful as you walk.” What we’re hearing is an invitation to a journey, a process, a continual path of living.

“Be careful how you walk, not as unwise people but as wise people.” I chuckled when I first read this as an invitation to a walk – how does one walk unwisely? Is this about walking on the right hand side of the road? Or the left hand side of a busy sidewalk? Is walking unwisely about not looking both ways before crossing the street? Or perhaps crossing when red hand says stop? Is walking unwisely going out at 2pm in the 95 degree heat, as opposed to the morning when it’s just 80 degrees?

The apostles seems to clarify, offering, “making the most of the time, because the days are evil.” Walking wisely seems to be more about what we’re doing *as we’re walking* then when or where the walk may be taking place. Rev. Dr. Jamie Clark-Soles offers, “[Walking Christianly] requires discernment and wisdom, because Christians live in a world ruled by Satan, powers, and principalities, all of which constantly aim to trip us up if not fell us.”¹ We have to be constantly aware of the world in which we’re walking. Not as one whose face is buried in their cell phone, but as those who are alert and cognizant of how the world around us might cause us to stumble or falter.

To walk wisely in a world marked by evil means to acknowledge the presence of evil, so that we might discern what is of God and what is not. Verse 17 picks up on this, offering, “Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

The apostle has spent quite a bit of time in this letter laying out for us the will of the God. The Lord desires for us to acknowledge our adoption as Children into the family of God’s beloved. The Lord desires for us to turn from the desires of the flesh to claim new life in Christ. The Lord desires for us to know that God’s grace has saved us from the wrath of sin and death. The Lord desires for us to claim peace as a unified humanity, made possible by God in Christ. The Lord desires for us to be bold and confident in our faith in Christ, that we might not lose heart in God’s claim because of the suffering and loss we may experience in this world. The apostle has laid these all out as the promises of God’s desire, the work of God in the world, the will of the Lord for creation.

But this focus, this understanding the will of God, it’s a continual process. It’s a journey – a walk – a life of seeking and knowing, asking and receiving, being made and remade.

In these verses, the apostle is using a structure of dichotomy to make these statements. There’s a assertion of how we should **not** live, which is then juxtaposed by how we **should** live. **Not as** unwise people, **but as** wise people. **Not as** a foolish person, **but as** one who understands the will of God.

The next juxtaposition offers, **do not live as** one who is drunk with wine, **but as** one who is filled with the Spirit. This text harkens back to Pentecost, when the disciples, filled with the Spirit were accused of being drunk. Do you remember what Peter said to the crowds in Acts 2:15? Peter, speaking on behalf of the Spirit-filled disciples, offered, “Indeed, these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.” Their actions, their energy, their ability to speak in the many languages of those who were gathered, it was so other-worldly that the crowds believed the disciples to be drunk. They were seen as living in an altered state of mind.

It is this altered state of mind that we are invited to seek in this text. In worship, in the reading and studying of God's word – as verse 19 offers, in the singing of the psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, in the making melody to the Lord, in the giving thanks to God at all times – in worship we are inviting our minds to be converted from the ways of the world to the ways of the Lord.

Worship is not a time to have our ways confirmed. It's not about finding support for the vision of the world that is offered by society, or the hopes and dreams of our political leaders, or the selfish ambitions of our individual bodies. Worship is not about finding support for our broken ways and cultural ideals.

Worship is about having our mind converted to the ways of God. It's about learning to discern what is of God and what is not. It's about being filled with the mind-altering power of the Spirit, as opposed to the mind altering substances of the earth. Worship is a time of conversion from the ways of the world to the mind of God.

Last week in our Ephesians Bible Study on Wednesday, we were reflecting again on the use of personal pronouns in the apostle's writing. Throughout this text to the Ephesians, the apostle continues to use the plural pronoun "you." Be careful how *you* live. Be filled with the Spirit as *you* sing psalms and hymns.

In offering these imperative statements, the apostle is not writing to any individual, but to the body. The invitation of this text is for the community to be formed and reformed, to be seeking the work of God in the world, to be walking wisely as a people in search of the will of the Lord. Professor Stephen Fowl offers, "Praising God in a public communal way, Christians are also indirectly addressing each other, encouraging and instructing each other in what will be their eternal practice, and this build up the church."ⁱⁱ

Our work in discerning God's will is not individual. Our forming and reforming is not private. Our work of conversion is not independent. We do this work in community. We rely on one other for the support we seek, for the affirmation we desire, just as much as we depend on one another for correction and transformation. We are called as the church to be God's image-bearers – as individual members, and as the formed and reformed body itself.

So may we share in this work with one another. May we be corrected and converted, that we might more perfectly represent the will of God in the world. May we be transformed, that God's love might be claimed and owned, proclaimed and displayed, that the world may see in our continual transformation the love of God for all of God's creation. May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Jaime Clark-Soles. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2009.

ⁱⁱ Stephen E. Fowl. *Ephesians, A Commentary (New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.