



CONVICTION & COMMENDATION

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ACTS 29
COMPETENCIES

Biblical Foundations

The word “conviction” occurs only twice in the ESV translation of the Bible. This is primarily because conviction is so closely aligned with a more frequent word, faith. The writer of Hebrews describes faith as “the *conviction* of things not seen” (11:1).

There are two Greek words behind the translation “conviction” in this text. The word *elegchos* (ἐλεγχος) has to do with presenting evidence for the truthfulness of something, making a case based on a proof. In other words, conviction *thinks* about the evidence. It isn’t mindless passion or energy for an idea or cause; it is hard won belief. True conviction requires faith in some fact or truth. Conviction is thinking about or seeing the imperceptible truths of God. But it is not just seeing.

The other word, *pragma* (πράγμα), from which we get the word “pragmatic,” means deed. It is “generally something that one is engaged in.”¹ Conviction requires getting something done. Conviction *acts*. Put the two words together, and the meaning of conviction fills out. *Conviction is thinking about and acting on a truth*, in our case truths about God. It is not enough to have great theology, or to be a good practitioner. A person of conviction *acts on their theology*. They obey what they know to be true about God.

With this in view, it comes as no surprise that the people of conviction listed in Hebrews are people who did something with the truth. They were people of faith: “Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (11:32-34). Social justice, heroic feats, prayerful intercession, powerful messages, the enemies of God put to flight—what they knew about God altered the way they lived. Pastor-elders and church planters require conviction because church planting is war.

Yet, one phrase in this text should haunt us, “were made strong out of weakness” (v.34). These leaders were weak. Men and women of conviction aren’t formed overnight. They are forged, not in the ivory tower but in the trenches of faith. We don’t know how much conviction we truly have until it has been tested. And the rest of this passage attests the sufferings of anonymous saints “of whom the world was not worthy” (v.38).

It is not enough to comprehend and believe the doctrines of grace. Nor is it sufficient to attempt great things for God. The final aspect of conviction is neither rational nor missional, theological nor pragmatic; it is spiritual, passionate even. Conviction *desires*. Neither knowledge nor stick-to-it-iveness are enough to get us through the battles that lie ahead. We need what these men and women of conviction had, desire for a better country: “But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city” (v.16). These are leaders of

¹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2000), 858.

otherworldly desire. Their affections were captivated by a vision of this world shot through, not with the glory of their deeds, but the glory of God.

Church leaders require this desire or they will devolve into church manipulators and managers. They need to be able to cast a compelling vision for God's glory through the church, and to desire Christ above their own glory. This will require much grace. God is disposed to give that grace *to the humble*: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). God will pour out this grace to the dependent and the repentant, those who cry out to him for strength and forgiveness.

Biblical conviction thinks, acts, and desires the kingdom. When selecting deacons, the apostles instructed a community of disciples to "pick out from among you seven men of good repute, of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty" (Acts 6:3). The men selected were of good repute—they did kingdom things. They were men of wisdom—they thought kingdom thoughts. And they were men of Spirit—they desired kingdom goals. Conviction is thinking-acting-desiring the kingdom and glory of God.

Commendation is a recognition of these things as it pertains to vocational ministry, and in particular, church planting. People should recognize in you: desire for the kingdom, knowledge of God's Word, and a demonstrable commitment to gospel ministry, regardless of the cost. These are things that must be weighed with a spouse and/or close friends. In addition, it is important that spiritual mentors and church leaders commend you for the work. God often confirms his call of an individual through the community (Acts 6:3; Galatians 1:18; 2:7-9).

Theological Reflection

Reflecting on his work as a poet, Christian Wiman said, "The thing about poetry is that it can become an idolatry. It was for me for a number of years. I could only find meaning in poetry. I didn't really believe that there was any meaning anywhere else."² Now, replace poetry with ministry and reread those sentences.

Wiman goes on to describe how his work became an abyss. When we derive our meaning and worth from how well we preach, how quickly we multiply, how many people show up on a Sunday or how many missional communities we have, we slide into the abyss. Wiman then heard another poet say: "eventually every single thing in you has to bow down." He meant that we can only find true meaning outside of our work, not inside of it. This is what Paul meant when he said: "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ" (Colossians 3:23-24). Here we have a motivation outside the work, greater than the work—the Lord Christ. He is our reward; he is our meaning. But when we are busy bowing down to something else, it will be impossible to bow down to Christ.

² <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2015/sep/oct/every-single-thing-in-you-has-to-bow-down.html>

David Brainerd was a missionary to Native American Indians in the 18th century. He planted a church among the Indians and endured great persecution and suffering. Struggling with severe bouts of depression and consumption (coughing up blood quite often), he died before the age of 30. His diary has been in publication ever since. What enabled him to endure such hardship and continue church planting? His regular attention to “divine subjects,” reading, journaling, writing and reflecting on God. He wrote, “My mind was so engaged in these meditations, I could scarcely turn it to anything else; and indeed, I could not be willing to part with so sweet an entertainment.”³

Brainerd found what Alfred North Whitehead called a “habitual vision of greatness.” In order to maintain gospel conviction over the long haul, we must attend to the divine subjects, asking God to make Christ and his Word a sweet entertainment, sweeter than any other escape. The church leader must be led by the Holy Spirit to return to Christ for worth, over and over again. He will give strength when we are weak, wisdom when we lack direction, and a vision of his greatness.

Cultural Engagement

Significant shifts have occurred in the way people construct their identity over the past fifty years. For centuries, Westerners built an identity on the modern self. The modern self is autonomous, powerful, and decisive. He creates his own destiny. The postmodern thinkers came along and rejected all of this. They said the autonomous self is a modern fiction, that there is no true self. Everything is subjective, no fixed truth, no fixed identity. As a result, “There is no essential me; it follows that I can be whatever I construct myself to be.”⁴ Sex, gender, vocation, and spirituality become fluid and fluctuate. The result is an inundation of *many selves* with people “identifying” with many things to find meaning and worth.

How does this impact gospel conviction? The gospel offers a single identity. Through union with Christ, we gain an identity that does not change nor should it be swapped out: “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:9-10). Our new creation identity is in the image of Christ, not the image of the world. It is true, substantial, and eternal.

But with many competing identities, it can be tempting to abandon gospel conviction to find our identity in other places. For example:

- Your convictions will be challenged as you get to know and love people who hold unorthodox views on various issues, e.g. affirming homosexuality. You will need to learn how to hold your convictions with wisdom and grace, as you relate to people who are far from Jesus.

³ John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God* (Wheaton, IL: 2001), 132.

⁴ Walsh & Middleton, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, IVP: 1995), 58.

- Disciples impacted by the decentered self may find themselves “committed” to an array of rotating “causes” from which to draw significance. They will divide their energies across many things, leading to a lack of intimacy with Christ and criticism of the church.
- Those in ministry may be tempted to identify as: well-loved leader, astute theologian, savvy missiologist, sage minister, entrepreneur, author, speaker or movement leader, and not as God’s new creation. Fight for joy in Christ.

If we are not careful to cultivate identity in Christ, we will find ourselves surrendering biblical and personal convictions to please our sinful selves and a decentered society. Leadership with gospel conviction requires a self centered in the security of union with Christ.

It is important for church planters to understand how these cultural shifts play out locally. This cannot be done from the armchair. It will be important to have lots of conversation with locals, inquiring about where they find their sense of meaning and identity. The best way to do this is by forming friendships with people in your city or town, both Christian and non-Christian. Consider keeping field notes on their responses to key questions like:

- What do you think about Christianity?
- Does our area need another church?
- What comes to mind when you think of church?
- Which is more identity-forming for you—gender, vocation, community?

These notes will help you develop a philosophy of ministry that is in touch with the real questions and values of your culture. In addition, they will help you preach and disciple people where they actually are.

Missional Significance

Without conviction church leaders will crumble under the pressures of ministry. These pressures come from the congregation, from ourselves, from peers, and from Satan. According to one survey, over a third of pastors struggle with depression. Over half overwork and yet cannot pay their bills.⁵ Ministry is not for the faint of heart. It is for this reason that Paul said, “I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:27-28, NIV).

In light of these challenges, it is important to form deep relationships with people who can exhort, encourage, and correct you. These friendships will be a lifeline in ministry. Form friendships with your elders, a team of comrades who punch holes in the darkness with the light of Christ. If you are married, your wife will also need these kinds of friendships. Work

⁵ <http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?blogid=4545&view=post&articleid=Statistics-on-Pastors-2016-Update&link=1&fldKeywords=&fldAuthor=&fldTopic=0>

hard to find them. Meet other pastors and pastors' wives; pray for the Spirit to provide these friends, and try to be as transparent as possible. Be aware that this will take time.

Also consider forming a mentor relationship with an established, wise pastor in your area. Ask them specific questions about the history of the church in your area, the successes and failures of church planters in your city or town. Invite them to help you, not just in ministry but also in life. This intentionality will enrich your life, your marriage, your church, and help clue you into the wider work of the Spirit in your area. Seek to establish, not a brand or even a niche, but a gospel partnership with those who are faithfully ministering the Word of God.

Be encouraged! God's Spirit has been at work in your area, through the prayers of saints in many churches, way ahead of your church plant. The gospel is growing and bearing fruit in all the world. Seek intimacy with Christ, fervency in prayer, and delight in God's Word. He will sustain you through any hardship.

Paul planted churches, made disciples, changed cities, wrote New Testament letters, but rarely does he mention these. Paul does not count or boast in his successes because he knows, deep down, they are not his to begin with. His conviction regarding the centrality of the gospel and the goal of glorifying God is so strong that it carries him, and many disciples with him, through the darkest of storms.

Conviction, thinking-acting-desiring the kingdom of God, is the hallmark of vibrant, lasting gospel ministry. This is seen perhaps most clearly when Paul comments to the Ephesian elders, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." (Acts 20:24). What is your ultimate aim? If it is adorning the gospel, then throw your life behind it and trust God with the results.

The mission of God moves through men and women who do not consider their lives as something, but Christ's life as everything. If we suffer like Paul for the cause of Christ, our gospel conviction will deepen and our focus on the kingdom narrow over time. Things will get simpler and clearer, and we become more resolute. As this happens, testifying to the gospel of God's grace will become, more and more, the result of *experiencing the gospel of God's grace*.

Following his earlier statement regarding the pressure of concern for all the churches Paul writes, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying" (2 Corinthians 11:30-31). A sign of gospel conviction is the willingness to be weak, to hold up our sins and failures to others and say, "Christ is enough." This, too, furthers the mission of God because it makes much of Christ and not much of us. Suffering that comes with the cause of Christ is unbearable without Christ. But with Christ, it will yield a harvest of eternal joy.

Further reading and reflection questions are available at acts29.com/competencies.