

Convictions become Character

By Jay Wegter

All those who truly know God are diligent to align themselves with God's plan and purpose. This means their aim is to conform themselves to God's truth. This is one of the reasons the book of 1st John was written; to keep truth and life joined. The Gnostic error was that you don't have to do the truth to have the truth. The book of 1st John puts that to the lie by indicating that it's not enough to agree with the truth, audit the truth, and assent to the truth—we must walk in the truth. 1st John has a number of tests which show if a person is of the truth (1st John 3:19). Our Savior said that He was sent into the world to bear witness to the truth (Matthew 18:37). When we think of the word “convictions” we're indicating that God's truth dominates exceptionally in our lives, controls us and transforms us. This is much different than merely holding loosely to some beliefs. People will argue about beliefs, but they will only die for convictions. Convictions have the power to transform us, but they come with a cost. That cost is that they are life altering. You will conform your life to your convictions. When Christ told us that we cannot serve two masters, He was indicating that no man can have a dichotomized worldview. You will live and do your real worldview. At the college where I teach, we have conferences called Truth & Life. We want to help students remove the disconnect between what they profess to believe, and how they live. Scripture indicates that the larger that gap between faith and practice, the more danger there is that we're living a life of hypocrisy. This is why we need to develop first hand convictions. They are much different than merely sitting under a strong pulpit ministry. First hand convictions mean that you love the truth, live the truth, and proclaim the truth. Sin and truth are at war. But the great error in the church today is that we may hold truth theoretically, in the abstract. That's a gnostic idea and 1st John was written to correct it. The apostle John continually asserts that truth is highly ethical. You really only know what you do. The goal of 1st John is to make sure that we are of the truth. That means you are a product of your convictions. They shape and mold your life. Your heart affections are conformed to the truth. Therefore you love the truth and the inner man. Even the battle to mortify sin takes place at the level of our convictions. John Piper says it this way: “All spiritual warfare takes place at the level of spiritual sight. Your pleasure is the measure of your treasure.” This is why truth is never held at the theoretical level only. Scripture warns that if we hear the truth and agree with it, but don't practice it, we have deceived ourselves. To believe the truth is a whole soul act. That means your mind, affections, will, and conscience are all joined in embracing the truth and relying upon it. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus indicated that believers are set apart to God in holiness and it is the word of God that has the power to do that (John 17:17). That means a true believer is set apart to God in all his faculties: his mind, his body, and his heart. For Christ has made it clear: true believers don't merely agree with historical facts, they follow Jesus. Therefore, their time, talent, affections, and resources are poured into aligning themselves with God's purpose. Christ's cause becomes their cause. This means that those who follow Jesus are controlled by their convictions. Our convictions are also joined to a clear perception of the desirability of Christ. That means we exhibit Christ and display Him to our heart affections. That means in our hearts we adore Him as advocate, as high priest, as our sealing and righteous covering, as our covenant, and as our propitiation. When we love Christ, we love His work for us. That means the application of His cross to our lives shatters our cowardice, it breaks up our stealth Christianity. We find ourselves emboldened, we welcome the truth that God reserves the right to define every square inch of our experience. Paul told Timothy to take pains in these things, to be utterly absorbed in them, in order to make proper progress (1st Timothy 4:15-16). Yes there is pain involved, God is changing us into the likeness of Christ and that involves some discomfort.

CS Lewis searched for words to describe this process. He looked up at his bookshelf and then said something like this “there is pain because it’s like little soldiers of tin becoming real soldiers of flesh and bone.” Paul told us that we are striving in strategy and striving in exertion in our effort to be radically identified with Christ (1st Timothy 1:18, 2nd Timothy 2:3, 1st Corinthians 9:7, 2nd Corinthians 10:1-6). Now the questions arises, why aren’t men pouring their energies into this endeavor of developing their convictions? Part of the answer is, number 1, they don’t see the value in it because no one has explained to them that this is their calling. Number 2, it seems like more trouble than it is worth, for who wants to set a higher and higher standard only to feel like you’re not achieving it. Men are already discouraged and so they go to other men for encouragement through validation. But other men really can’t provide it. In fact our human craving for validation, when we take that craving to other mortals, it produces a pecking order, codependent pastors and congregations, and celebrity churches. The real answer is that the only real validation comes through reckoning our sonship in Christ. Then we do the hard work of believing the Gospel and consenting to receive God’s love for Christ’s sake. Preaching the Gospel to ourselves is about the surpassing worthiness of Christ as the source of our righteousness. As giving us acceptance in the beloved, as perfecting what He began in us. Exhibiting Christ to our own souls always involves the Gospel order; we get a glimpse of our utter wretchedness in ourselves, we see our souls poverty, nakedness, and exposure to wrath. And then we see Christ’s desirability, His perfect suitability as savior. Then our hearts beat with affection for Him as true treasure. This is the Spirit’s goal, that by the Gospel we’re always making the match between our sinner ship and His savior hood. This means explaining to your own soul Christ’s perfect suitability to answer your ruin. Christ as Lord of the cosmos is worthy to be our King. By our convictions we consolidate our loyalty to Him, we answer to Him in accountability. And if we’re secretly serving the imposter King, we repent of that and bow the knee afresh to Christ (2nd Corinthians 4:4, Romans 6:14-23). Our convictions are also about our ultimate identity. God tells us we are a new creation, or a new man. Deep conviction is about reckoning these identification truths. That means identity is about the real you. The new man has new values, new desires, a new bias against sin, new courage, a new love of the truth, a new desire to serve, a new desire to know and be known by God, a new power for obedience. There are entire chapters describing the new behaviors of the new man. The new man is called to put off old man behaviors and put on new man behaviors. This is the freedom of the sons of God, the new man is to assert himself. Your convictions also continually educate your desires because your convictions are joined to your treasure. In Gnosticism, beliefs and use of the body were separated. The split or disconnect was deepened by habitual sin. How was he to preach against this error? In our techno-pleasure culture many Christians audit the truth instead of love the truth, live the truth, and suffer for the truth. When we give in and grant dominion to a ruling lust we are relinquishing territory in our hearts and there is a net loss in our grasp of the truth. The Gnostic lie says you may successfully live a disconnected dichotomized life. Scripture refutes that indicating that only if you live the truth and love the truth will you walk in the light in fellowship with God in blessedness. Again, convictions sketch out our identity in Christ—we call that identity sonship. That God is for our happiness by way of holiness. He is for our godly masculinity. When we are controlled by these sonship realities we reckon God’s love and obedience is easy. In that sense, our identity and our sonship becomes a kind of script that marks out our path. We could describe that path as satisfaction, soma, and surrender. Satisfaction in that our deepest desires are met in the Lord, soma the Greek word for body means we experience deep community, and surrender which means our sanctification progresses as we submit to Christ and are ruled by His word. God has created our hearts to be in pursuit of satisfaction. And since we are made in His image, you could say we’ve been created to run on God. Now God has a boundless desire to share Himself and He does so with His people. God is known through Christ and Christ exports the wealth of the Godhead into our

experience. The Gospel makes possible for a mortal to experience endless satisfaction in our holy God. We open our Bible to meet with Him and God communicates Himself to us. There is pleasure, joy, love, life, light, blessedness, favor, acceptance, supply, security, belonging, covenant, goodness, structure, discipline. God meets our deepest needs in Himself. Convictions are necessary in order for us to fight for joy, fight for purity, fight for holiness. Scripture calls this renewing the mind. As we walk through this corrupt world, we pick up contamination. We're tempted to pursue happiness directly through lust. Our flesh seeks to usurp the role of the Spirit as it proposes temporal objects of desire in place of God. It's at this point that our convictions play a key role in Spiritual warfare. God has called us to a kind of activism. That activism involves a proper use of our freedom. We're told in Galatians 5 that Christ has called us to freedom. But boundless freedom is dangerous. So that same chapter warns us that we are not to use our freedom as an opportunity to indulge our flesh, but through love we are to serve one another. Proactive service through love yields a byproduct of godly masculinity. We assume responsibility on behalf of others. And God advances our sphere of influence. God is calling men to be a clear channel of agape love to others. This involves allowing the Gospel to order our inner world over and over again. Let's consider for a moment how radically convictions shape your character. When you see God as your highest good, and find your purpose in His infinite worth, and you live for Him knowing He's worthy of your praise, your best, your adoration, your loyalty and enjoyment. This means that God is your source person. This is not an either or proposition. Either you regard God as your source, or the world as your source. If you see the world as your primary source of security, significance, satisfaction, identity, love, meaning, and belonging then scripture says you're in a very dangerous position. For those who love the world will pass away along with it. So now that we've seen the importance of just how much convictions shape our life, let's consider how we develop convictions. The systematic study of God's truth is known as Bible doctrine. But doctrine is not merely religious knowledge; it is wisdom for how to live unto God. In addition, doctrine is relational. It addresses our need and ability to order our lives in the presence of God under His watchful eye. There is a cost to developing firsthand convictions. God requires that we structure our lives as His possession. This means we preach to ourselves who God is. He is the creator of the cosmos and this world is punctuated by His works, His ways, His wonders, and His will. The Holy Spirit is given to us to write these things on our hearts as we diligently study them and meditate upon them. Scripture refers to this as having the mind of Christ. Now, why don't Christian men make it a priority to diligently study doctrine and flesh out their convictions? Well, truth requires commitment. There is a very strong ethical obligation and self-denial that comes with God's truth. Sadly, the majority of Christian men opt for arrested spiritual development. They go for a compartmentalized Christianity. Their lack of firsthand convictions means that spiritually they are going to remain juvenile and immature. Men hesitate to deepen their convictions because they still want to live a self-directed life. You see it's an inescapable fact that the authority of God stands behind His truth. God's truth has no existence of its own, but because it is His truth it is immutable and binding. Therefore, to be of the truth is to be of the God of truth. And that means a profound loyalty to Him. In our postmodern age, the force of the truth has been dulled by privatized interpretations which blunt the proclamation thus sayeth the Lord. The postmodern hermeneutic would suggest that God has stuttered and that all is now relative to the individual and his perceived needs. But God has spoken very clearly. God is our ultimate teacher and Father and therefore we could describe Him as a didactic patriarch. Christian men are also called to imitate God and be didactic patriarchs. That means there is a unique purview for men in the area of theology. Our culture has declared war on didactic patriarchs. That's an indirect war on God the ultimate didactic patriarch. God is calling men to recover and rebound from an emasculating culture. We are to do this by theologizing. Men are called to be truth brokers, truth speakers, and proficient at wielding the source of truth. What a

contrast this is from limp wristed, obsequious, males who live for the approval of those around them because their convictions are weak, are fluid, are in flux, and not established by the immutable authority of God's Word. Convictions build masculine character. Man is the glory of God. His equipping to exercise his headship with joy turns upon having first hand convictions. Aren't we tired of the rising tide of apathetic neuters in the church? Metrosexual hipster consumers who are harmless to the kingdom of darkness. What is necessary for these men to grow up into Christ and become truth brokers? To want to assume roles of leadership without compromise? To become men who love the truth, live the truth, and nurture the truth. We must see something of God's communicable attributes in the male. For there is a masculine character of God that must be seen in the Father and in the male. Man is to be the glory of God imaging His love, truth and authority in the same person. He must show the courage to speak the truth. Men are called to have convictions in order to imitate the Father (Ephesians 5:1-2). Men are called to have convictions to know what the Father is doing in the world and identify with His cause of building His spiritual temple, of constructing His family of true worshippers. Of being part of His boundless redemptive story. Men are to have convictions to preach and build their treasure, for convictions tell us what will survive the coming judgment and what is truly important. Convictions give a man profound discernment and moral authority that he might help others smash their idols. Convictions enable us to follow Christ, to count the cost, to become convinced that denying ourselves and taking up our cross will make us enormously happy. Without convictions, service is a flash in the pan. Pastors are tempted to hype their programs, to use guilt for recruitment to ministry. But the effects are temporal. It will not survive opposition. Those who are shamed into service grow weeds and not real fruit. Firsthand convictions are the solution to the feminized church, seeker pastors may be saying that doctrine divides, but the truth is that firsthand convictions renew, transform, and empower the men who hold them.