

How Biblical Convictions become Christian Character

By Jay Wegter

What is a biblical conviction?

In terms of belief, a *conviction* is the mental state of being convinced—the fixed state of belief. **To hold a conviction is to ‘be held by’ an unshakeable belief without need of further proof or evidence** (see **Hebrews 11:1-3**). Biblical convictions are the very core and foundation of godly character and virtue. ***The Bible stresses the central importance of truth and doctrine.*** In the pastoral epistles there is a clear link between sound doctrine and godliness. “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following” (**1 Tim 4:6**). “If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited *and* understands nothing. . .” (**1 Tim 6:3-4a**). “But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine.” “Likewise urge the young men to be sensible; in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound *in* speech, which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us” (**Titus 2:1, 6-7**).

Our Savior was sent into the world to bear witness to the truth (Mt 18:37). The incarnation of Christ and His work on Calvary was the great cost necessary to put man back in possession of the truth. The Lie in Eden offered independence from God upon the false basis that God’s glory opposes our highest good. **The gospel of Jesus Christ restores believing sinners to the truth that God’s glory is our highest good.** And God’s glory is inseparable from His purpose to be merciful and benevolent to us His creatures. God’s righteousness, His commitment to His Name, and His zeal for His glory has become the cause of our salvation (**Rom 1:16-17; 3:23-26**). **Thus, to possess the truth is to be experiencing the knowledge of God and His glory, as well as the liberty it produces.** The knowledge of God in Christ, revealed in our salvation is the foundation of our Christian convictions (**Jn 17:3; Gal 4:9**).

Salvation in Christ changes our reliance from self and the world to God.

The Lord has pledged to be our God and to pour His benevolence upon those who rely upon Him—that reliance is evidenced by trust in Him and living by His statutes (**Ps 31:19-21**). Faith in God’s Word allows us to continually ‘see’ God as our source of life. **The fight for security and satisfaction in God is a fight of faith (1Tim 1:18; 6:12)**—it is always about perceived source or supply. The prophet Jeremiah documents the nation of

Judah's tragic return to the world as its imagined source and supply. "For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water" (**Jer 2:13**).

God giving us Himself in Christ is the foundation for our biblical convictions.

Christ prays thematically in this manner in His high priestly prayer in **John chapter 17**. "The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me" (**Jn 17:22-23ff.**). God giving Himself to His people, and the saints giving themselves to God is the pattern for holy living. This glorious plan will reach its consummation in eternity, and this is what will make heaven a place of endless bliss—**Revelation 21:3-4**.

Why is the Holy Trinity so crucial to our saving knowledge of God?

It is a remarkable and wonderful truth that our Triune God is a perfectly self-contained 'community' of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and as such our transcendent God is satisfied in Himself. In other words, He needs nothing from His creation, however our Creator desires to share Himself and extend His glory. But, to accomplish this He chose to deal decisively with the sin barrier that separates His creatures from His glory. **Hence, in sending the Son as Redeemer, He fulfills His absolute claim and demand for perfect righteousness. For in the cross He satisfies His holy and just demand to punish sin (2 Cor 5:21).** Through Christ, our righteous and suffering Substitute, God satisfies the claims He has upon us for perfect righteousness (**Rom 10:4**). Thus, the propitiation accomplished at the cross is the basis of God setting Himself free to pour out infinite grace beginning with forgiveness and justification, and consummating in glorification.

These areas of divine satisfaction—issuing in the revelation of, and fulfillment of His righteousness—become the basis for believers to pursue satisfaction in Him.

Consider the beauty inherent in His purpose: **1)** As Triune God He is satisfied in Himself. **2)** In His plan to redeem sinners, He satisfies His just claims for righteousness and justice against our sins by means of the work of Christ. **3)** These two aspects of satisfaction become the foundation for our full pursuit of satisfaction in God. **This immediately becomes relevant to practical theology—for satisfaction in who God is in Himself, and the satisfaction which Christ accomplished for His people become the reason we are called to pursue satisfaction in Him.** Thus, who God is toward us in Christ forms the foundation of our convictions. Praise God, our convictions are not merely cold hard doctrinal facts, but are grounded upon God's loving purposes to share Himself by bringing us into an immutable, eternal family and thereby extending His glory (**Eph 1:9-14**).

Convictions are about the truths necessary for living righteously unto God.

We are to grow up into Christ and thus be protected from every ‘wind of doctrine’ (Eph 4:14). And how are we to guard against error? We are to follow the doctrine of the apostles (1 Tim 4:6; 6:1). We are to guard against those who promote a ‘different doctrine’ (1 Tim 6:3). **We are to commit ourselves to doctrine which conforms to godliness (1 Tim 6:3).** We are to retain the standard of sound words in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus (2 Tim 1:13). The goal of biblical instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Tim 1:5). Not one of these exhortations leaves doctrine in a sealed theological vault, no, all is plowed into our Christian walk. **Hence, when these truths are ‘actualized’ in our practice, they become the character-shaping convictions by which we navigate through life as men and women of God.** Truth becomes practice when we are consciously building a repository of biblical wisdom by which we live unto God (Prov 2:1-22; 8:32-36).

Our convictions deepen as we are conformed to the truth of God—which describes a hearer of the Word being a doer of the Word (Jas 1:22-25). Convictions are truth in action; therefore, they build character. Being conformed to the truth is essential if we are to imitate the Lord (Eph 5:1-2). “Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.” Convictions enable the believer to speak the truth of God with sincerity. **The man of God lives to speak the truth as a ‘truth-broker’—in so doing he is a *spiritual influencer* of others.** “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16). In our commitment to love, admonish, and instruct the brethren we are ‘imitating God’ (Eph 5:1) and thereby investing in eternal treasure.

Thus, biblical convictions tell us what will survive the coming judgment. Hence, our convictions totally shape our eternal value system (2 Cor 10:3-5; Heb 12:25-29). **Biblical convictions give the Christian profound wisdom and discernment in all life choices—which is inseparable from character (1 Cor 2:14-16; Heb 5:11-14).**

The Gnostic error: you don’t have to do the truth to have the truth.

Our aim is to conform our lives to God’s truth. This is one of the reasons the book of First John was written—to keep truth and life joined. **The Gnostic error was that you don’t have to practice the truth to possess the truth.** The book of First John puts that to the lie by indicating that it’s not enough to agree with the truth, or merely ‘audit’ the truth, we

must walk in the truth. John's first epistle puts forth several tests which show if a person is *of the truth*. "Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We will know by this that we are *of the truth*, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things" (1 Jn 3:18-20). **Truth liberates, and sin enslaves.**

Sin and truth are at war; you cannot keep them both—one of them will have to go (Jn 8:31-36). A great error in the church today is that we may hold truth theoretically, in the abstract without diligently practicing it. The proposition that you may possess biblical convictions, but not Christian character is a lie. **The apostle John continually asserts that truth is highly ethical. You actually only know what you do—if you don't practice the truth, you don't really possess the truth.ⁱ** The goal of First John is to make certain that we are operating and living completely in the realm of God's truth. **To live so that the truth dominates exceptionally in your life means you are a product of your convictions—you are 'a product of the product' so to speak.** What you are in life and character is because the truths of Scripture are exerting the transforming power necessary to shape and mold your life and character (1Thess 2:13).

God's will is that we be conformed to Christ in holiness (Rom 8:28-30).

The book of Ephesians is the book of God's loving, gracious, and glorious purpose for His people. And the great evidence that the believer is the object of God's redeeming mercy is that the saint ***radically aligns himself with God's purpose.*** Thus, the genuine believer is diligent in doing God's will—and God's will for us is our conformity to Christ in holiness (Rom 8:28-30; Eph 1:4). ***The purpose of mortification of sin is to arrive at the goal for which God in His grace laid hold of us—namely, conformity to Christ (2 Thess 2:14; Rom 8:29ff.).*** God always accomplishes His purposes with a precise goal in view. He declares the end from the beginning (Is 46:10). God decrees, He predestines, He foreordains—He works with the end in mind (Eph 1:9-12).

We must learn to cultivate the habit of mortification of sin with the end in mind. We are not putting sin to death merely for the purpose of being practical moralists, or because a virtuous life is superior to an unethical life. **No, in our struggle with the flesh we must begin with the right goal in mind.** For, the destination of mortification of sin is life with God in glory. Our efforts at sanctification by way of putting sin to death should serve an ultimate end—the end for which we were created anew in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 5:17; 1 Jn 3:1-3; Eph 5:27). Sin has twisted the image of God. The Lord recreates and restores His people to His perfect image. As new creatures we are to abandon the old sinful behaviors and attitudes and adopt the new. Our efforts at mortification are not

merely focused on abstinence, but upon replacement behaviors. In mortification we *put on the behaviors and character of the new man and put off the attitudes and behaviors of the old man* (Eph 4:22-32; Col 3:8-17ff.).ⁱⁱ

As a redeemed child of God your life is now defined by, filled with, and encompassed with God's loving purpose to make you like Christ. These purposes of God are spiritual realities which are intended to fill your consciousness, vision, and desires. **They are to shape your goals, your hope, and your motives—in other words: they must become your first-hand, core convictions.** To be “filled with the knowledge of His will” is only possible if we are paying close attention to His Word (Col 1:9-12). Your relationship to God's Word is a faithful barometer of your walk with God. **A genuine believer studies God's Word to understand it because he knows he can't live without God's Word.** He studies the Word because the redeemed live lives of ongoing fellowship with God (1 Jn 1:1-9). They continue seeking God through His Word, prayer, and fellowship—that is daily ‘foundry’ in which biblical convictions are forged.

God's Word gives us an urgent mandate, *be transformed by the truth by the renewal of your minds* (Rom 12:1-2; Eph 4:23).

Developing biblical convictions means becoming utterly serious about God's claim upon our lives. **We are not our own, we are bought with a price—as God's own possession we live as belonging to Him** (1 Cor 6:19-20; Titus 2:14). **To live as His possession involves constantly renewing our minds by the Word.** “Therefore, I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is your spiritual service of worship.* And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:1-2). “That, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph 4:20-24).

Biblical convictions are filled with ethical obligation because all truth is moral in nature—truth always calls for action. When Christ said we cannot serve two masters, He was indicating that no man can live a dichotomized worldview with divided loyalties (Mt 6:24). **Your devotion to whom and what you serve is like a laser beam: it is focused. Head and heart cannot pull in opposite directions for long—you will be conformed to what you love, and what you love you will serve.** “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone *as slaves for obedience,* you are slaves of the one whom

you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?”
(Rom 6:16).

Truth is not safe in a theoretical category or compartment.

Scripture indicates that the larger the gap between faith and practice, the greater the danger of hypocrisy. This is why we need to develop first-hand convictions. **Having first-hand convictions is much different than merely sitting under a strong pulpit ministry.** Countless Christians have ‘secondhand convictions’—*secondhand* meaning they believe something because their pastor teaches it. **By contrast, first-hand convictions mean that you personally diligently study the truth, love the truth, live the truth, and proclaim the truth.** The Berean believers in Paul’s day showed the diligence necessary to develop firsthand convictions: “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Biblical convictions are held by both our mind and by our affections.

When you have first-hand convictions, your heart affections are conformed to biblical truth. Therefore, you love the truth in the inner man. “Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom” (Ps 51:6). 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—it is to be rooted in our desires and heart affections.

Scripture warns that if we hear the truth and agree with it, but don’t practice it, we have deceived ourselves. “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does” (Jas 1:22-25). Many in Christendom today are attempting to do what they hate (practice holiness) and stop doing what they love (sinning).ⁱⁱⁱ It is a cardinal principle, God’s truth will only order your life if you are a new creature who seeks the highest satisfaction in God.

Because heart and head operate in unison, to believe the truth so as to do the truth is a ‘whole soul’ act. This means that your mind, affections, will, and conscience are all joined in embracing the truth, relying upon it, and acting upon it. In His high

priestly prayer, Jesus indicated that the Word of God has the power to sanctify us, setting us apart to God and His purposes. “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (**Jn 17:17**). **A true believer is set apart to God in all his faculties of soul: in his mind, his body, and his heart.** For Scripture makes it clear, true believers don’t merely agree with historical facts of Christ’s life, they follow Jesus (**Lu 9:23**). Therefore, a believer is a true disciple or follower of Christ whose time, talent, affections, and resources are poured into aligning himself with God’s purpose. Christ’s cause has become his cause. **Hence, to follow Jesus is to be controlled by biblical convictions.**

Our convictions are also joined to a clear perception of the desirability of Christ. **As we keep on believing the promises of God in the gospel, we exhibit Christ to our heart affections.** As a result, we adore Him as advocate, as High Priest, and righteous covering, and as our covenant and propitiation. When we love Christ, we have a deep appreciation of His Person in accomplishing His work for us (**1 Pet 1:3-9**). **His atoning work exerts a transforming power in our lives—the application of His cross to our lives shatters our cowardice, it breaks up our undercover ‘stealth Christianity’.** We find ourselves emboldened in His service, and we welcome the truth that God reserves the right to define every square inch of our experience. The strongest Christians are those of deep conviction—they are ‘Christ-learners’ who follow the Savior; their surrender to Him produces endurance and boldness in service (**Eph 6:18-20**).

Why are so many apathetic about deepening their biblical convictions?

The normal Christian life is one of striving to live out our identity in Christ (1 Tim 1:18; 2 Tim 2:3; 2 Cor 10:1-6). “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but *only* one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then *do it* to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore, I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified” (**1 Cor 9:24-27; Heb 12:1-2**).

What is required to develop our biblical convictions?

By ongoing repentance and by conforming ourselves to the truth we ‘close the gap’ between faith and practice. Biblical convictions put steel in the backbone, enabling us to fight for joy, fight for purity, and fight for holiness. Scripture calls this *renewing the mind* (**Rom 12:1-2; Col 3:10ff.**). As we walk through this corrupt world, we tend to pick up contamination like dirt on our shoes. We are assaulted with a litany of false offers of

fulfillment, and at times we're tempted to pursue happiness through lust. **Our flesh seeks to usurp the role of the Spirit as it proposes and offers temporal objects of desire in place of God.** It's at this point that our biblical convictions play a key role in our success in spiritual warfare. God has called us to a kind of **activism** designated the *mortification of sin* (**Rom 6:11-13; Col 3:1-5**).

That activism involves a proper use of our freedom. We're instructed in Galatians chapter five that Christ has called us to freedom. But boundless freedom is dangerous if not used properly. "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (**Gal 5:13**). **The believer's remarkable freedom in Christ is to be harnessed in service to His Body. We are set free to serve.** This liberation in Christ prepares us to commit ourselves to the needs of others. "Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (**Phil 2:1-4**). As we walk by faith in Christ by means of His gospel promises, He manifests His love to us and the 'overflow' is a compelling desire to invest in others by serving them.

Living by faith is difficult because it is filled with the necessity of spiritual discipline and self-denial, therefore the life of faith is totally self-renouncing (**Heb 6:11-12**). In other words, to live by faith is to live upon Another, upon Christ instead of upon our own strength and wits. This goes against the grain of self. In our fallenness, we gravitate toward pride, comfort, and complacency. **Biblical convictions give us the 'horsepower' necessary to swim against the current of our lower natures through the enabling power of the Spirit** (**Gal 5:16-18ff.**). Firsthand convictions pay wonderful dividends such as intimacy with God, "The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His covenant" (**Ps 25:14**) (see also **Prov 4:23; 30:5-6**).

We have seen that the basis for our convictions is God's satisfaction in Himself, and His satisfaction in giving Himself to us in Christ and adopting us as His beloved sons and daughters. He did so that we might live unto Him and find our ultimate satisfaction in knowing, trusting, and serving Him. Thus, Christian character is our response to being invited into God's plot, His glory story. Growth in Christian character cannot be reduced to moral striving. For, the Christian character God desires in us flows from His love relationship with us as we give ourselves back to Him in filial fear—in loving reverence and in obedient love (**Rom 8:18-23**).

First-hand convictions unleash the truth's transforming power.

- What role do first-hand convictions play in our being conformed to Christ?
- Why are first-hand convictions important to the development of Christian character?
- Why do first-hand convictions exercise such a central role in the fight of faith?
- Why is it significant that first-hand convictions are held in both the intellect and the affections?
- Our relation to God's truth is not static, explain how Scriptural truth is intended to move through head, heart, and hands.
- Describe the parallel between new growth in a tree moving from green to hard wood, and spiritual growth in a believer becoming virtue and character.
- Define what Paul meant in Galatians chapter five and six when he commands the believer to, *walk by the Spirit*, and *sow to the Spirit*.
- Explain why the commands in Ephesians four and Colossians three to engage in 'replacement behaviors' differ from pursuing bare moralism?
- The great divines remind us to preach for genuine conversion, and not merely for profession of faith. What is the difference between the two?
- What are the biblical reasons to keep mortifying what remains of our lower natures?
- Why is knowledge merely theoretical if not joined to obedience?
- Why is it so important to move knowledge into wisdom by practicing the truth?
- In the book of Jude why does contending earnestly for the faith involve proclaiming a gospel that has holiness as its aim?
- Explain how discipleship is the missing element in moving folks from *being truth auditors* to actual Christ-followers.
- Explain why running the race with endurance and hope depends upon fixing our eyes on Christ Jesus.
- Explain how the believer can utilize every trial to rid himself of all double-mindedness and also better consolidate his treasure in Christ.
- Self-denial marks the life of discipleship. Explain how decisions made in self-denial and sacrificial obedience will ultimately serve us, whereas decisions made in fleshly indulgence, we will have to serve.

Endnotes:

ⁱ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*

ⁱⁱ Chris Lundgaard, *The Enemy Within*

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Washer on the biblical imperative of holiness