

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

PNEUMATOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

UNIT 5: THE SPIRIT AND THE APPLICATION OF REDEMPTION

Lesson 13

The Spirit and Conversion Repentance and Faith

The Spirit-Wrought Response to the Gospel

Key Texts: Acts 20:21; John 16:8–11; Acts 11:18; 16:14; Ephesians 2:8–9; Philippians 1:29
“Repentance Toward God and Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ”

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Series Verse

*“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes,
He will guide you into all the truth;
for He will not speak on His own initiative,
but whatever He hears, He will speak;
and He will disclose to you what is to come.”*

John 16:13, NASB 1995

Introduction

Lessons 11 and 12 have established the foundational divine acts of the *ordo salutis*: effectual calling and regeneration. Both are entirely the Spirit's sovereign work, prior to any human response, creating the very spiritual life and the very spiritual capacity by which the sinner can then respond to the gospel. Now, with Lesson 13, we cross the most important boundary in all of soteriology: from the divine side to the human side, from what the Spirit does in us to what we do in response. We arrive at conversion, the human act of repentance and faith by which the sinner turns from sin and turns to Christ.

The word "conversion" (Greek: *epistrophē*, turning; Latin: *conversio*, a turning around) describes the moment of decisive personal response to the gospel, the turning point at which the sinner who was moving away from God turns and moves toward Him. Paul's most compact definition comes in Acts 20:21, where he summarizes his ministry as "solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (NASB 1995). The two elements, repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, are the two dimensions of conversion: repentance is the negative dimension (turning from), faith is the positive dimension (turning to). They are not two sequential acts performed one after the other; they are two aspects of the single, unified act of conversion, as inseparable as the two sides of a coin. One does not repent without believing, nor believe without repenting.

The central pneumatological thesis of this lesson is one that evangelical Christianity has often struggled to maintain with the fullness it deserves: conversion, though genuinely human, is entirely Spirit-wrought. Repentance is not a human contribution to salvation that supplements the Spirit's work; it is the Spirit's gift, produced in the renewed soul by the Spirit's own sovereign grace. Faith is not a natural human capacity activated by the presentation of the gospel; it is the Spirit's creation in the regenerate soul, the first expression of the new nature that regeneration has produced. Neither repentance nor faith is a human work that earns or activates divine grace; both are human acts that are, at their root, divine gifts, the Spirit's work expressing itself through the genuinely human response of the regenerate sinner.

This does not make conversion less real or less human. It makes it more deeply real: a conversion produced by the Spirit's sovereign grace is more genuine, more lasting, and more transformative than a conversion produced by human effort or emotional manipulation. The repentance that the Spirit produces is a repentance that cuts all the way down to the root of the soul's orientation toward sin; the faith that the Spirit gives is a faith that clings to Christ not as an intellectual preference but as the desperate, life-giving grip of a soul that knows itself to have no other hope. This is the repentance and faith that leads to life (Acts 11:18), life that the Spirit Himself is its source and its sustainer.

I. Conversion Defined: The Two Dimensions of the Turning

Repentance Toward God and Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ

The classic biblical summary of conversion is Acts 20:21: “repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” The two elements of conversion are directed toward two distinct but inseparable divine realities: repentance is directed toward God (as the One who has been offended, whose law has been violated, whose holiness has been dishonored), and faith is directed toward the Lord Jesus Christ (as the One who has, through His atoning death and resurrection, provided the means by which the offending sinner can be reconciled to the offended God). The directional specificity is not incidental: true repentance is not merely feeling sorry for sin’s consequences or being ashamed of sin’s exposure; it is a turning toward God, toward His holiness, His authority, His right to command obedience, and His mercy in providing forgiveness. True faith is not merely intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions about Jesus; it is personal trust in a personal Lord, the self-abandoning, self-entrusting act of a soul that looks to Christ as its only and sufficient hope.

The relationship between the two elements is one of mutual implication: genuine repentance always includes the implicit turn toward the One from whom it is turning to, the movement away from sin is simultaneously a movement toward God in Christ. And genuine faith always includes the implicit acknowledgment of what one is being saved from, the clinging to Christ presupposes an awareness of the sin from which He saves. The Westminster Shorter Catechism’s definition of repentance captures the inseparability well: “Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience” (Q. 87). Note the Christological element even in the definition of repentance: “apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ”, genuine repentance does not turn from sin in isolation but turns from sin toward the mercy of God that Christ provides.

II. The Spirit’s Work of Conviction

John 16:8–11, He Will Convict the World

A. The Three-Dimensional Conviction

Before examining repentance and faith as Spirit-wrought acts of conversion, we must examine the Spirit’s preliminary work that makes conversion possible and intelligible: conviction. Jesus’ promise in John 16:8–11 is one of the most important pneumatological statements in the Farewell Discourse: “And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged” (NASB 1995). The Spirit’s convicting work is three-dimensional, and each dimension addresses a specific deficiency in the unregenerate sinner’s understanding.

The first dimension of conviction is concerning sin. The specific sin identified is unbelief in Jesus, “concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me.” This is theologically precise and practically important. The deepest sin of the human heart is not any particular moral failure or social transgression; it is the refusal to believe in Jesus Christ, the rejection of the one remedy that God has provided for human sinfulness. The Spirit’s conviction concerning sin drives to the root of the sinner’s problem: not merely the surface manifestations of sin’s fruit in particular acts, but the foundational orientation of the soul away from Christ and toward self. This conviction of sin that cuts to the root is the Spirit’s work, not the preacher’s rhetoric; no amount of skillful moral argument can produce the deep, soul-penetrating awareness of sin’s true character that the Spirit alone can generate.

The second dimension is concerning righteousness, “because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me.” This is the most theologically intricate of the three. The Spirit convicts the world concerning righteousness by pointing to the righteousness of Christ, demonstrated and confirmed by His ascension to the Father’s right hand. The world had rejected Jesus as a blasphemer and a criminal; God vindicated Him by resurrection and ascension, seating Him at the Father’s right hand. The Spirit’s conviction concerning righteousness establishes two related truths simultaneously: that Christ is truly righteous (God’s vindication of the rejected One), and that the world is not, that the human righteousness on which the unregenerate sinner relies is shown to be utterly inadequate by the very righteousness that God accepts. The Spirit convicts the sinner of his own unrighteousness by illuminating the righteousness of Christ that he lacks.

The third dimension is concerning judgment, “because the ruler of this world has been judged.” Satan, the ruler of this world, has been judged through the cross and the resurrection (cf. John 12:31; Colossians 2:15). The Spirit convicts the world of the reality and the certainty of divine judgment by pointing to the judgment that has already been executed on the principality behind the world’s rejection of Christ. If the prince of this world has been judged, then those who follow him and participate in his rejection of Christ are under the same judgment. The conviction concerning judgment is the Spirit’s sovereign act of opening the sinner’s eyes to the eschatological reality that stands beyond the present: a day of judgment that is as certain as the judgment that has already fallen on the one who had seemed to rule.

B. The Pastoral Significance of Spirit-Wrought Conviction

The pastoral significance of understanding conviction as the Spirit’s work is considerable. First, it liberates the evangelist from the responsibility of producing conviction in the hearer. No preacher, however gifted; no argument, however logical; no appeal to emotion, however skillfully crafted, can produce the soul-penetrating, Christ-revealing, judgment-illuminating conviction that the Spirit produces through the Word. The preacher’s responsibility is to proclaim the truth faithfully, clearly, and urgently; the Spirit’s responsibility is to drive that truth to the root of the soul. When the evangelist confuses these two responsibilities and attempts to produce the Spirit’s work by his own rhetorical effort, the result is manipulated decisions that lack the depth and the permanence of genuinely Spirit-wrought conviction.

Second, understanding conviction as Spirit-wrought explains both the reality and the variability of the sinner’s experience of coming to faith. Some conversions are preceded by dramatic,

prolonged periods of deep conviction, the crushing awareness of sin and unworthiness that writers like John Bunyan and Jonathan Edwards' awakened New Englanders described with such vivid and painful clarity. Others are marked by a quieter, less dramatic conviction that flows naturally into faith. Both patterns are consistent with the Spirit's sovereign freedom: He convicts as He wills, with the depth and the duration that His sovereign purpose for that individual soul requires. The absence of prolonged agony of conviction does not indicate a deficient conversion, nor does the presence of deep pre-conversion anguish guarantee a genuine one. The Spirit blows where He wills, and He convicts as He wills.

III. Repentance as a Gift of the Spirit

Acts 11:18 and the Divine Grant of Turning

A. The Surprise of Cornelius and the Revelation of Grace

The pneumatological ground of repentance, that repentance is not a human contribution to salvation but a divine gift, is established with particular clarity in the narrative context of Acts 11:18. The occasion is Peter's report to the Jerusalem church about the conversion of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:44–48). When the circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter heard that the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, people who had not converted to Judaism or undergone circumcision, they were astonished. When they then heard Peter's full account of the event, including the Spirit's coming upon the Gentiles while Peter was still speaking, their astonishment gave way to worship: "When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.'" (Acts 11:18, NASB 1995).

The pneumatological claim of Acts 11:18 is concentrated in the word "granted" (edoken, the aorist of didōmi, to give). Repentance, specifically, the repentance that leads to life, is given by God. It is not generated by the sinner on the basis of his own recognition of his spiritual condition; it is granted by God as a sovereign gift of grace. The Jerusalem believers do not say, "Well then, the Gentiles have also chosen to repent"; they say, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life." The agency is divine; the repentance is given, not generated.

Second Timothy 2:25 reinforces this pneumatological character of repentance from a different angle: "with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth." Paul's instruction to Timothy about how to deal with opponents of the truth includes a telling caveat: the outcome, their repentance, is not in Timothy's hands or in the opponents' hands; it is in God's hands. God may grant them repentance. The pastor who corrects gently does his part; the Spirit who grants repentance does His. The grant of repentance is a divine conditional, not a human achievement.

B. Repentance Defined: What the Spirit Grants

Since repentance is the Spirit's gift, the question of what repentance actually is carries pneumatological weight: what does the Spirit grant when He grants repentance? The biblical

vocabulary for repentance employs two primary Greek words. *Metanoeo* (noun: *metanoia*) literally means “a change of mind”, but in the biblical context, the mind that changes is not merely the intellect but the entire orientating center of the person: the will, the affections, and the judgment about what is truly valuable. *Metanoia* is a complete reorientation of the soul from its previous direction toward sin and self to a new direction toward God and His will. *Epistrepho* (noun: *epistrophē*) means “to turn”, the active movement of turning around, the dynamic act of changing direction. The two words together capture the two dimensions of Spirit-wrought repentance: the inward reorientation (*metanoia*) and the outward turning (*epistrophē*).

Spirit-wrought repentance is not merely an intellectual acknowledgment of wrongdoing, a temporary emotional regret for sin’s consequences, or a moralistic resolve to do better. These are 2 Corinthians 7:10’s “worldly sorrow” that produces death, the sorrow of someone who regrets having been caught, or who resents the consequences of sin, without genuinely recognizing and hating the sin itself. Spirit-wrought repentance is what the same verse calls “godly sorrow that produces repentance without regret, leading to salvation.” Godly sorrow is the Spirit’s work in the soul: the genuine recognition and hating of sin as sin, not merely as harmful or embarrassing, but as an offense against the holy God who made us and who has every right to our love and obedience. Godly sorrow grieves not primarily over sin’s consequences but over sin’s character: it is grief over having dishonored God, over having treated His commands with contempt, over having preferred the creature to the Creator. This grief, this turning, this reorientation is what the Spirit grants in regeneration and what the converted soul expresses in repentance.

“God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life” | “He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” | “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God”

Acts 11:18; John 16:8; Ephesians 2:8, NASB 1995

IV. Faith as a Gift of the Spirit

Ephesians 2:8–9 and the Divine Source of Saving Trust

A. The Exegesis of Ephesians 2:8–9

The most important single text on the divine source of saving faith is Ephesians 2:8–9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (NASB 1995). The verse’s structure, its assertion that the saving event is “not of yourselves” and “not as a result of works”, establishes that no element of the salvation described can be claimed as a human contribution or achievement. The question is how comprehensive this exclusion is: does it apply only to formal religious works (circumcision, temple observance, Torah-keeping), or does it extend to the act of believing itself?

The Greek grammar of the verse provides the decisive answer. The word translated “that” (touto) is a neuter demonstrative pronoun. The word translated “faith” (pistis) is feminine. The grammatical rule of Greek is that a pronoun agrees with its antecedent in gender; but touto (neuter) cannot grammatically refer to pistis (feminine) as its antecedent. This means that touto cannot refer merely to faith in isolation. What touto refers to is the entire preceding clause, the whole saving event described in verse 8a: “by grace you have been saved through faith.” That entire package, the grace, the faith, and the salvation itself, is “not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” The faith is as much a gift of God as the grace and the salvation. The sinner does not bring his own faith to the divine transaction and receive grace in return; the faith itself is part of the divine gift.

Philippians 1:29 makes the same point with even more direct language: “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (NASB 1995). The verb “granted” (echaristhē, from charizomai, to give graciously, to grant as a gift of grace) applies equally to both believing and suffering: both are gifts of God’s grace to the believer. The believing is granted, not generated; it is given, not earned; it is the Spirit’s gift, not the sinner’s contribution. Acts 16:14 provides a narrative illustration of exactly this principle: “A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.” The Lord opened her heart. Not Paul’s eloquence, not her personal spiritual readiness, not her prior religious devotion as a God-fearer, the Lord opened her heart, and she responded. The response is genuine; the opening is divine.

B. Faith Defined: What the Spirit Grants

Since saving faith is the Spirit’s gift, the question of what saving faith actually is carries the same pneumatological weight as the question about repentance. The Reformed tradition has identified three classical elements of saving faith: notitia (knowledge), assensus (assent), and fiducia (trust). Notitia is the cognitive content of faith, the specific knowledge of the gospel that faith requires: who Jesus is, what He did, why His death and resurrection are necessary and sufficient for salvation. Faith is not a contentless spiritual openness; it is trust in a specific Person on the basis of specific truths about that Person. Assensus is the intellectual affirmation of those truths as true, faith is not merely awareness of the gospel but conviction of its truth. But notitia and assensus alone do not constitute saving faith: the demons believe and shudder (James 2:19), knowing and affirming who Jesus is without saving trust in Him.

The third element, fiducia, personal trust, is the heart of saving faith and the element that notitia and assensus alone cannot produce. Fiducia is the personal entrusting of the soul to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the act by which the soul moves from knowing and affirming the gospel’s content to personally resting on and committing to the Christ whom the gospel presents. It is the difference between knowing that a bridge is strong enough to hold you and actually walking across it; the difference between knowing that a physician is competent and actually submitting to his treatment; the difference between knowing the gospel’s claims and actually trusting the Christ to whom those claims point. This personal trust, the soul’s abandonment of self-reliance and self-righteousness in favor of total reliance on Christ’s righteousness and atoning work, is what the Spirit grants when He grants saving faith.

The Spirit's role in producing fiducia is essential and irreplaceable. Notitia and assensus can be generated by education, persuasion, and argument; fiducia cannot. No amount of information or argumentation can produce the soul's genuine personal entrusting of itself to Christ, the movement from knowing about Christ to trusting in Christ. This is the Spirit's territory. He produces the fiducia that the preacher cannot manufacture by illuminating the truth of the gospel so powerfully that it becomes not merely credible but compelling, not merely intellectually defensible but personally irresistible as the only genuine hope for a soul that has been shown its own sin and its own desperate need for the righteousness that Christ alone provides.

V. Regeneration and Conversion: Cause and Effect

The Logical Relationship Between the Divine Work and the Human Response

Having established both that conversion is genuinely human (Lesson 13's burden) and that its two elements, repentance and faith, are the Spirit's gifts (the central pneumatological thesis of this lesson), we can now articulate with precision the logical relationship between regeneration (Lesson 12) and conversion (this lesson). Regeneration is the cause; conversion is the effect. The Spirit gives new life (regeneration), and that new life expresses itself in turning and trusting (conversion). The new nature that regeneration creates has a natural, Spirit-produced orientation toward God, an orientation that inevitably expresses itself in repentance (turning from the sin that the new nature finds repugnant) and faith (turning to the Christ whom the new nature recognizes as Savior and Lord).

The analogy of physical birth and the first breath is instructive. No one teaches a newborn infant to breathe; the breath is the immediate, natural, inevitable expression of the life that birth has given. The infant does not earn its first breath or produce it by an act of will; the first breath is the natural expression of the life that birth has created. Similarly, repentance and faith are the first "breath" of the new spiritual life that regeneration has created, the natural, immediate, inevitable expression of the new nature that the Spirit has brought into being. The regenerate soul repents and believes not because it has been externally commanded to (though it has been) and not because it has been emotionally manipulated into it (though manipulation may have played a role in the surrounding circumstances), but because repentance and faith are what the new nature does. The Spirit has created a soul that is oriented toward God, and a soul oriented toward God repents of sin and trusts in Christ.

This cause-and-effect relationship between regeneration and conversion preserves both divine sovereignty and genuine human agency. The sovereignty is preserved because the decisive act that produces the conversion, the regeneration that creates the new nature, is entirely the Spirit's work. The human agency is preserved because the repentance and faith that follow regeneration are genuinely the sinner's own acts, real expressions of his genuine orientation, real exercises of his genuine desire, real movements of his genuine will. He is not a robot; he is a genuinely new person, and his conversion is the genuine expression of who he now, by the Spirit's grace, is. The Westminster Confession's formulation applies here as it does to effectual

calling: “yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.” The freedom is real; the grace that produces the freedom is sovereign.

VI. The Ongoing Nature of Repentance

Luther's First Thesis and the Lifelong Posture of Turning

One of the most important and most practically consequential pneumatological truths about repentance is that it is not merely an event at the beginning of the Christian life but an ongoing orientation that characterizes the Christian life in its entirety. Martin Luther's first thesis, nailed to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, makes the point with characteristic force: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Luther was combating the Roman Catholic reduction of repentance to the sacrament of penance, the institutional, priest-mediated, episodic rite by which sins were formally confessed and absolved. His corrective was the biblical understanding of repentance as a continuous orientation of the Christian life, not a discrete religious rite performed at specific intervals.

The pneumatological basis for ongoing repentance is the ongoing presence and work of the Spirit who produced initial repentance. The Spirit who granted repentance at conversion does not cease His convicting, illumining, and turning work after the initial act of conversion; He continues this work throughout the entire Christian life, deepening the believer's recognition of sin, sharpening the believer's sense of the holiness of God, and producing the ongoing, progressive turning from sin toward God that sanctification describes. The Spirit who convicted the sinner of unbelief, unrighteousness, and coming judgment before conversion continues to convict the believer of the specific, ongoing sins that resist the Spirit's sanctifying work after conversion (Ephesians 4:30). The response to this ongoing conviction is ongoing repentance.

The practical shape of ongoing repentance is not the perpetual performance of a religious rite but the daily posture of a soul that takes sin seriously and takes grace seriously in equal measure. John Owen's classic instruction is apt: the mortification of sin is not a once-accomplished victory but a daily battle, the Spirit-enabled, death-dealing engagement with the remaining sin of the unregenerate nature that the believer still carries. Repentance is the weapon of that battle: the specific, honest, Spirit-enabled turning from each sin as it is exposed by the Spirit's convicting work and the Word's illumining power. The Christian who does not repent regularly is not a mature Christian who has moved beyond repentance; he is a Christian whose sensitivity to the Spirit's conviction has been dulled by spiritual pride or by the comfortable accommodation to sin that 1 John 3:9 describes as characteristic of the unregenerate, not the regenerate.

The ongoing nature of repentance also has a positive dimension that is often missed in presentations focused primarily on sin's mortification: ongoing repentance keeps the Christian perpetually oriented toward grace. The Christian who repents regularly is the Christian who regularly flees to Christ for forgiveness, who regularly appropriates the assurance of 1 John 1:9 (“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”), and who regularly experiences the Spirit's restoring, renewing, life-giving

presence in the aftermath of honest repentance. Ongoing repentance is not the evidence of a struggling or failing Christianity; it is the evidence of a spiritually alive and spiritually sensitive Christian life, one in which the Spirit's conviction is being heeded and the Spirit's comfort is being received.

VII. Pastoral Implications: Your Conversion Was the Spirit's Work

The Comfort, the Humility, and the Urgency That Flow from Spirit-Wrought Conversion

If repentance and faith are the Spirit's gifts rather than human contributions to salvation, then the pastoral implications are both identical to and continuous with those established in Lessons 11 and 12: the same assurance, the same humility, and the same evangelistic urgency that flow from understanding effectual calling and regeneration also flow from understanding the Spirit-sourced character of conversion.

The implication for assurance is among the most comforting truths in all of Christian doctrine. The believer who understands that his repentance and faith were Spirit-wrought gifts, not his own contributions to a divine transaction, has a qualitatively different foundation for his assurance than the believer who thinks of his faith as the decisive human act that activated divine grace. If your faith was given by the Spirit, then its permanence is grounded in the faithfulness of the Spirit who gave it, not in the consistency of your own willpower. You may doubt the strength of your faith; you need not doubt the sovereignty of the One who gave it. The Spirit who granted you repentance and faith is the same Spirit who seals you until the day of redemption (Ephesians 1:13–14; 4:30). He did not give you repentance and faith in order to withdraw them. He gave them as the first installment of the eschatological inheritance that He will bring to completion.

The implication for humility is equally important. If your repentance and faith were given to you, then the fact that you have turned from sin and trusted in Christ gives you no grounds for pride over those who have not, and no grounds for despair over those who have not yet. You did not repent because you were more spiritually sensitive than they are; the Spirit granted you repentance. You did not believe because you were more intellectually open or more morally honest; the Lord opened your heart (Acts 16:14). The grace that produced your conversion is the grace that is available to those who have not yet received it, and the Spirit who granted it to you can grant it to them as well. Pray for them accordingly.

The implication for evangelism is not quietism but urgency of a specifically Spirit-dependent kind. The proclamation of the gospel is the instrument through which the Spirit produces conviction (the preached Word is the instrument of John 16:8–11's three-dimensional conviction), the instrument through which He produces repentance (faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ, Romans 10:17), and the instrument through which He produces faith (1 Peter 1:23, born again through the living and enduring word of God). The Spirit-wrought character of repentance and faith does not make the evangelist superfluous; it makes the preached Word the most important instrument in the Spirit's converting work.

Preach faithfully and urgently. Pray for the Spirit to grant repentance and faith through what you preach. And leave the result, the grant of repentance, the opening of the heart, the giving of faith, to the sovereign Spirit whose work it is.

*“Solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks
of repentance toward God
and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Acts 20:21, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Conversion	The human act of decisive personal response to the gospel, consisting of two inseparable dimensions: repentance (turning from sin and self toward God) and faith (trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior). Paul summarizes the content of his entire apostolic ministry as “repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). Though conversion is genuinely human, the sinner truly repents and truly believes, both repentance and faith are themselves gifts of the Spirit, produced in the regenerate soul by the Spirit’s sovereign grace. Conversion is the human side of what regeneration is the divine side: the new life that regeneration creates expresses itself in the turning and trusting that conversion describes.
Conviction	The Spirit’s preliminary work described in John 16:8–11, by which He opens the sinner’s eyes to three realities that make conversion both necessary and possible: sin (specifically the foundational sin of unbelief in Jesus), righteousness (the righteousness of Christ demonstrated by the ascension, which the sinner lacks), and judgment (the eschatological certainty of divine judgment, prefigured in the judgment of Satan that the cross accomplished). Conviction is the Spirit’s work, not the preacher’s rhetoric; the preacher proclaims the truth through which the Spirit convicts, but the convicting itself is the Spirit’s sovereign act.
Metanoia	Greek: literally, “a change of mind.” The primary New Testament word for repentance, denoting a comprehensive reorientation of the soul’s entire orientating center, its will, affections, and judgment about what is truly valuable, from its previous direction toward sin and self to a new direction toward God and His will. Metanoia is distinguished from mere regret (which feels sorry without changing direction) and from moralistic resolve (which changes external behavior without transforming internal orientation). Spirit-wrought metanoia is produced by godly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:10), genuine grief over sin as an offense against the holy God, not merely as a source of personal inconvenience.
Epistrophē	Greek: a turning. The second primary New Testament word for repentance/conversion, emphasizing the active, dynamic movement of turning around, the kinetic dimension of what metanoia describes internally. Epistrophē describes the outward turning that accompanies the inward reorientation: the turning from idols to serve a living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9), the turning from darkness to light (Acts 26:18). Together, metanoia (inward reorientation) and epistrophē (outward turning) capture the full biblical picture of Spirit-wrought repentance: a change of orientation that expresses itself in a change of direction.

Term	Definition
Godly Sorrow	2 Corinthians 7:10's designation for the Spirit-wrought grief that produces genuine repentance: "Godly sorrow produces repentance without regret, leading to salvation." Distinguished from worldly sorrow (which regrets sin's consequences without genuinely recognizing and hating the sin itself), godly sorrow is the Spirit's work in the soul, the genuine recognition and hating of sin as sin, as an offense against the holy God who made us and has every right to our love and obedience. Godly sorrow grieves not over having been caught but over having dishonored God; it produces a repentance that is genuine, lasting, and oriented toward restoration of relationship with God rather than mere avoidance of further consequences.
Notitia / Assensus / Fiducia	The three classical elements of saving faith in the Reformed tradition. Notitia (knowledge) is the cognitive content of faith, the specific knowledge of the gospel: who Jesus is, what He did, and why His death and resurrection are necessary and sufficient for salvation. Assensus (assent) is the intellectual affirmation of those truths as true. Fiducia (trust) is the personal entrusting of the soul to Jesus Christ, the soul's abandonment of self-reliance in favor of total reliance on Christ's righteousness and atoning work. Notitia and assensus are necessary for saving faith but insufficient alone (demons have both); fiducia is the distinguishing element of saving faith, the one that only the Spirit can produce by illumining the gospel so powerfully that it becomes personally compelling rather than merely intellectually credible.
Fiducia	Latin: trust, confidence. The personal-trust dimension of saving faith, the soul's self-entrusting to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, as distinct from the mere knowledge (notitia) or intellectual assent (assensus) that demons also possess (James 2:19). Fiducia is the heart of saving faith: the movement from knowing about Christ to personally trusting in Christ, from acknowledging the gospel's credibility to resting one's eternal hope upon it. The Spirit's unique role in producing fiducia distinguishes genuine saving faith from its counterfeits: no amount of information, argument, or emotional appeal can produce the genuine personal trust in Christ that only the Spirit can create by illumining the gospel's truth as supremely and personally compelling.
Ongoing Repentance	The biblical and Reformation understanding that repentance is not merely an event at conversion but a lifelong posture of the Christian life. Luther's first thesis (1517) stated the principle: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent,' He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." The Spirit who granted initial repentance at conversion continues His convicting work throughout the Christian life (Ephesians 4:30), producing the ongoing recognition of and turning from specific sins that constitutes the Spirit-enabled mortification of the old nature. Ongoing repentance is not the evidence of a failing Christianity but of a spiritually alive and Spirit-sensitive one.

Term	Definition
Worldly Sorrow	2 Corinthians 7:10's designation for the grief that regrets sin's consequences without genuinely recognizing and hating the sin itself, the sorrow of someone who regrets having been caught, who resents sin's social or personal costs, or who fears judgment without genuinely loving righteousness. Worldly sorrow produces death because it lacks the genuine turning from sin toward God that constitutes repentance. It may produce behavioral change motivated by self-interest, but it does not produce the genuine reorientation of the soul's affections toward God that godly sorrow produces. Worldly sorrow is the sorrow of Judas (Matthew 27:3–5); godly sorrow is the sorrow of Peter (Matthew 26:75; John 21:15–17).
The Lord Opened Her Heart	Acts 16:14's description of the Spirit's work in the conversion of Lydia: "The Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." The narrative is pneumatologically precise: Paul speaks (the external call), but the Lord opens the heart (the internal effectual work). Lydia's response is genuine; the opening that enables the response is divine. The phrase "opened her heart" captures the mechanism of the Spirit's work in conversion: not coercing the will but opening the closed heart to the truth that it was previously unable to receive. Acts 16:14 is one of the clearest narrative illustrations in the New Testament of the concursive operation of the Spirit's sovereign work and the sinner's genuine response.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: *What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that both repentance and faith are the Spirit's gifts, not human contributions to salvation. This conviction must be held with sufficient theological precision to actually shape how we talk about conversion, in sermons, in personal evangelism, in counseling, and in the stories we tell about our own coming to faith. The language of conversion that places primary agency on the human side, "I decided to believe," "I chose to follow Christ," "I made a commitment", is not wrong in describing the human experience of conversion, but it is theologically incomplete without the corresponding acknowledgment that the decision was Spirit-wrought, the following was Spirit-enabled, and the commitment was the expression of a Spirit-given new nature. The complete account of conversion always has two sides: the human act (genuine repentance and faith) and the divine gift (the Spirit's granting of both).

We must also believe that the conviction the Spirit produces is the indispensable prerequisite for conversion, and that this conviction cannot be manufactured by rhetorical skill or emotional manipulation. The preacher who understands John 16:8–11 will not attempt to produce by his own means what the Spirit alone can produce. He will proclaim the truth faithfully, trusting the Spirit to drive that truth to the root of the hearer's soul. He will not substitute emotional appeal for substantive proclamation, not because emotion is inappropriate in preaching, the biblical proclamation of sin, righteousness, and judgment is inherently moving, but because the emotion that serves conversion is the emotion that the Spirit produces in response to the truth, not the emotion that the preacher engineers in place of the truth.

B. For the Heart: *What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the doctrine of Spirit-wrought repentance produce in you a fresh appreciation for the texture of genuine repentance as distinct from its counterfeits. Worldly sorrow, regret for consequences, shame at exposure, fear of punishment, is familiar to everyone and requires no Spirit to produce. Godly sorrow, genuine grief over having offended the holy God, genuine turning from sin as sin rather than as inconvenience, is the Spirit's work and is far less common than it appears. Examine your own repentance: when you confess sin, are you grieving primarily over sin's consequences in your life and relationships, or primarily over the offense your sin is to the God who loves you and whom you love? The Spirit's ongoing conviction work is designed to produce the latter, and the believer who welcomes that conviction, who opens himself to the Spirit's uncomfortable illumination of specific sin rather than suppressing it, will find that ongoing godly sorrow is one of the most spiritually alive and most grace-dependent experiences available to the Christian.

Desire, above all, a repentance that is continuous and not merely episodic, a life shaped by Luther's first thesis rather than by the ecclesiastical reduction of repentance to a formal rite or the evangelical reduction of repentance to the initial conversion moment. The Spirit who convicted you before you came to faith is the Spirit who convicts you now; His ongoing

conviction is not a sign of His displeasure but of His faithfulness. Welcome it. Welcome the uncomfortable work of the One who loves you enough to keep bringing you back to the cross.

C. For the Hands: *What Must We Do?*

- Study John 16:8–11 carefully, and then evaluate your evangelism practice against the Spirit’s three-dimensional conviction. Does your gospel proclamation address all three dimensions that the Spirit uses, sin (especially the foundational sin of unbelief in Christ), righteousness (the righteousness of Christ that the sinner lacks and that God provides), and judgment (the eschatological certainty of divine judgment that the cross of Christ addresses)? Which dimension do you tend to emphasize most, and which do you tend to neglect? How would a more balanced engagement with all three dimensions of Spirit-intended conviction shape the way you present the gospel?
- Read 2 Corinthians 7:8–11, Paul’s account of the Corinthians’ repentance in response to his painful letter. Note the seven evidences of godly sorrow Paul lists in verse 11: earnestness, eagerness to clear themselves, indignation, fear, longing, zeal, and avenging of wrong. Then compare this with the kind of repentance you have typically expressed, either at your initial conversion or in your ongoing repentance. Does your repentance exhibit the urgency, the specificity, and the orientation toward God’s honor that Paul describes as the fruit of godly sorrow? Where do you see worldly sorrow masquerading as genuine repentance in your own life?
- Memorize Ephesians 2:8–9 and meditate on the grammar: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” The “that” (*touto*) refers to the whole saving package, including the faith. Let the memorization of this verse produce the specific gratitude of one who understands that even his faith was given to him, not merely that God saved him after he believed, but that God gave him the belief itself. How does this transform the pride structure of your spiritual self-understanding?
- Practice the three elements of saving faith, *notitia*, *assensus*, *fiducia*, as a diagnostic tool in pastoral conversation. When you speak with someone who claims to be a Christian, learn to gently probe all three: Do they know the specific content of the gospel (*notitia*)? Do they genuinely affirm its truth (*assensus*)? And, the crucial and often neglected question, do they personally trust in Christ as their only hope, or are they relying on their morality, their church attendance, their religious heritage, or their sincerity alongside Christ? The *fiducia* question is the one that most often reveals the difference between nominal and genuine faith.
- Commit to practicing Luther’s first thesis for the next month: wake each morning with the conscious intention that this will be a day of ongoing repentance. Not the performing of a religious rite, but the open posture of a soul that invites the Spirit’s convicting work, that pays attention to the internal promptings that signal specific sin, and that responds to each conviction with prompt, specific, godly sorrow and the turning that godly sorrow produces. Keep a brief journal of what the Spirit surfaces in you during this period, not as a catalog of guilt but as a record of the Spirit’s faithful, loving, ongoing work of conforming you to the image of Christ.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Describe your own conversion experience. Which came first in your experience, a sense of conviction about sin, a sense of the righteousness you lacked, a fear of judgment, or a positive attraction to Christ? Looking back through the lens of John 16:8–11, which of the Spirit’s three dimensions of conviction was most prominent in your experience of coming to faith? Which was least prominent, and does that pattern tell you anything about the particular character of the Spirit’s work in your particular conversion?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read John 16:7–11. Jesus says the Spirit will convict the world concerning (1) sin, (2) righteousness, and (3) judgment. For each, He gives a specific explanatory “because” clause: (1) because they do not believe in Me; (2) because I go to the Father; (3) because the ruler of this world has been judged. Why does Jesus identify these specific “because” clauses? What is the theological logic connecting each conviction to its explanatory clause? And note that conviction concerning sin is primarily about unbelief in Jesus, not about moral transgressions in general. What are the implications of this for how we present the gospel’s diagnosis of the human problem?
3. Read Acts 11:14–18. Note the sequence: Peter speaks the word (v. 14), the Spirit falls (v. 15–16), and then the Jerusalem church concludes (v. 18). What does this narrative sequence reveal about the relationship between human proclamation and divine initiative in conversion? Why do the Jerusalem believers respond to the Cornelius account specifically with the conclusion that “God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life”, what was surprising about this conclusion, and why did the surprise produce worship rather than controversy?
4. Read Ephesians 2:8–9 carefully. The lesson argues that the Greek “touto” (that) is neuter and therefore cannot refer to the feminine “pistis” (faith) alone, but must refer to the entire saving package. Look up the Greek or find a commentary that addresses the grammar. Does the grammatical argument convince you? Are there other ways to read the verse that still honor Paul’s intention? What does the broader context of Ephesians 2:1–9, specifically the emphasis on “not of yourselves” and “not as a result of works, so that no one may boast”, contribute to the interpretation of verse 8?
5. Read Acts 16:11–15. Lydia is described as “a worshiper of God”, a God-fearer, someone with pre-existing religious orientation toward the God of Israel. Paul speaks, and “the Lord opened her heart to respond.” What does the detail that Lydia was already a God-fearer contribute to the passage’s pneumatological argument? Does prior religious

devotion make the Spirit's work unnecessary? What does the "opened her heart" description reveal about the nature of the obstacle that the Spirit overcomes in every conversion?

6. Read 2 Corinthians 7:8–11. Paul distinguishes "godly sorrow" from "worldly sorrow" and lists seven specific evidences of godly sorrow in the Corinthians' repentance (v. 11). What distinguishes godly from worldly sorrow in Paul's account, not just the results but the orientation, the object, and the motivation? How do the seven evidences of verse 11 (earnestness, eagerness to clear themselves, indignation, fear, longing, zeal, avenging of wrong) flow naturally from a repentance that is genuinely oriented toward God's honor rather than personal self-interest?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson argues that conviction of sin, as Jesus describes it in John 16:9, is primarily about unbelief in Jesus rather than about specific moral transgressions. How does this understanding shape the content and the strategy of Spirit-dependent gospel proclamation? If the Spirit's conviction about sin zeroes in on unbelief in Christ as the root problem, what does that imply about the relative importance of moral argument vs. the proclamation of Christ in evangelism?
8. The lesson presents the three classical elements of saving faith: *notitia* (knowledge), *assensus* (assent), and *fiducia* (trust). The distinction between *assensus* and *fiducia* is the key: demons have *assensus* without *fiducia* (James 2:19). How does this distinction help explain why some who appear to have converted (they affirm the gospel's content, they assent to its truth) do not continue in faith? And what does it mean practically to help someone move from *assensus* to genuine *fiducia*, from intellectual agreement to personal trust?
9. Luther's first thesis says the entire life of believers should be one of repentance. The lesson draws out the pneumatological basis for this: the Spirit who produced initial repentance continues His convicting work throughout the Christian life (Ephesians 4:30). But there is a tension: Paul says in Hebrews 6:1 to "press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance." How do these two apparently contrasting emphases relate to each other? Is Luther's ongoing repentance the same as the foundational repentance that Hebrews says we should leave behind?
10. The lesson argues that the cause-and-effect relationship between regeneration (divine cause) and conversion (human effect) preserves both divine sovereignty and genuine human agency. But a persistent objection is that if repentance and faith are caused by regeneration, then the sinner is not truly responsible for refusing them. Evaluate this objection using the biblical data. Does John 3:18–19 ("the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God") create a problem for the view that faith is the Spirit's gift? How does the Reformed tradition navigate the tension between human responsibility and divine sovereignty in conversion?

11. The lesson identifies three pastoral implications of Spirit-wrought conversion: assurance (grounded in the Spirit's faithfulness, not the sinner's consistency), humility (the converting sinner has nothing to boast of), and evangelistic urgency (Spirit-trusting, Word-proclaiming witness). A common objection is that presenting repentance and faith as Spirit-wrought gifts undermines evangelistic urgency: if God will grant them to whom He will, why bother calling people to repent and believe? How does the lesson address this objection, and how do texts like Romans 10:14–17 and Acts 17:30 ("God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent") bear on it?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. The lesson proposes evaluating your evangelism against John 16:8–11's three dimensions of conviction: sin (especially unbelief in Christ), righteousness (the righteousness of Christ the sinner lacks), and judgment (the eschatological reality of divine judgment). Audit a recent gospel conversation or a recent evangelistic sermon you gave or heard. Which of the three dimensions was most fully addressed? Which was absent or minimized? What would it look like to present the gospel in a way that deliberately gives the Spirit material to work with in all three dimensions of conviction?
13. The lesson proposes examining whether your repentance is characterized more by godly sorrow (grief over having offended God) or worldly sorrow (grief over consequences and exposure). Identify a specific sin you have confessed recently. Was your sorrow primarily about what the sin did to you, to others, or to your reputation, or primarily about what the sin expressed about your orientation toward God and about the offense it was to His holiness? What would it mean to confess that same sin again with the specific orientation of godly sorrow rather than worldly sorrow?
14. The lesson proposes committing to Luther's first thesis for a month, a daily, conscious posture of ongoing repentance that welcomes the Spirit's convicting work. What specific obstacles in your current spiritual life make this commitment difficult? Pride that resists conviction? Busyness that leaves no room for self-examination? A theology that treats repentance as purely initial rather than ongoing? What would need to change in your daily routine for the practice of ongoing, Spirit-welcomed repentance to become habitual?
15. The pastoral implication of Spirit-wrought conversion for prayer is that we can pray specifically for the Spirit to grant repentance and faith to those we are trying to reach with the gospel. Take the five unconverted people you prayed for in the previous two lessons and bring them to God again, but this time, pray specifically for the Spirit to produce in each of them the godly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:10) and the personal trust in Christ (fiducia) that Spirit-wrought conversion involves. How does praying for specific pneumatological acts (godly sorrow, opened heart, personal trust) rather than vague spiritual improvement change the character of your intercession?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson with a reading of John 16:5–15, the Spirit’s full job description as Jesus describes it in the Farewell Discourse: the Paraclete who comes because Jesus goes, who convicts the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment, who guides into all truth and glorifies Christ. Read it with the awareness that this is the same Spirit who convicts and converts the sinner, the same Spirit who is currently at work in the hearts of those to whom you witness, the same Spirit whose sovereign work in opening closed hearts is the indispensable precondition of every genuine conversion. Let the reading set the pneumatological frame: we are not doing evangelism alone; we are proclaiming a gospel through which the Spirit works to produce conviction, repentance, and faith.

Begin the prayer time with an act of gratitude for the Spirit’s specific work in your own conversion. Not a vague gratitude for salvation in general, but the specific, detailed gratitude of someone who now understands the pneumatological texture of what happened when they came to faith. Thank the Spirit for the conviction He produced, the specific sense of sin, the recognition of your own unrighteousness before Christ’s righteousness, the awareness of coming judgment that made the gospel’s offer of mercy urgent rather than optional. Thank Him for the repentance He granted, not your own achieving of a turn toward God, but His gift of turning in the renewed soul He was creating. Thank Him for the faith He gave, the fiducia that moved you from knowing about Christ to trusting in Christ, from assent to self-entrusting. None of this was your achievement; all of it was His gift. Let the prayer express the depth of that recognition.

Spend time in corporate confession, shaped by the distinction between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. Read 2 Corinthians 7:10 aloud: “Godly sorrow produces repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.” Then invite the gathered community to identify, in silence, the specific ways in which their repentance has been more worldly than godly, more concerned with consequences and reputation than with the offense their sin is to the holy God. Confess this together: not the specific sins themselves (which are for private confession before God), but the character of the repentance with which they have been confessed. Ask the Spirit to produce in each person the godly sorrow that produces repentance without regret, the kind of turning that the Spirit’s conviction creates and that leads to life rather than merely to behavioral change.

Close with intercession for specific unconverted people. Pray for them using the three-dimensional language of John 16:8–11: ask the Spirit to convict them of the specific sin of unbelief in Christ, to illuminate for them the righteousness of Christ that they lack and desperately need, and to open their eyes to the reality and the certainty of divine judgment from which Christ’s atoning work alone can save them. Pray for the Spirit to open their hearts as He opened Lydia’s (Acts 16:14), to grant them repentance as He granted it to the Gentiles (Acts 11:18), and to give them the faith that is His gift (Ephesians 2:8–9; Philippians 1:29). Close

with the confidence of Romans 10:17, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ”, committing to speak that word faithfully and trusting the Spirit to make it effectual.

*“For by grace you have been saved through faith;
and that not of yourselves,
it is the gift of God;
not as a result of works,
so that no one may boast.”*

Ephesians 2:8–9, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Acts 20:21; John 16:5–15; Acts 11:14–18; Acts 16:11–15; 2 Timothy 2:25; Ephesians 2:8–9; Philippians 1:29; 2 Corinthians 7:8–11; John 3:18–19; Romans 10:14–17; Acts 17:30; 1 John 1:9

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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