

Celebrating Conversion:

A RESOURCE FOR CHRISTIAN CAMPS

“Do you want to become a Christian?” Yes!, is the response that camp staffers love to hear after a full week of worship, play, and new relationships. Christian camping was born out of the hope that campers would make abiding decisions to follow Jesus Christ. Camps build whole programs around introducing campers to God’s amazing love, showing campers the beauty of God’s creative work, and anchoring campers in the good news of salvation. It is no wonder that camp staffs take great joy in the transformation that God does in campers’ lives even over the period of a single week!

The importance of conversion in Christian camping and its role in faith beg the question: what, exactly, is conversion?

- If conversion is indeed central to God’s work of salvation, what does it mean to “make disciples”?
- Is there a difference between conversion as new birth and conversion as new life?
- How do the biblical narratives shape the meaning and practices around conversion?
- Is there anything distinct about the Evangelical Covenant’s theology of conversion?
- How do staff members lead campers to Christ, and what is good language for counselors and speakers to consider when talking about conversion?
- What kinds of practices encourage campers in their next step of faith?

Three key themes emerge from the exploration of these questions: 1) Conversion is a gift, 2) Conversion is communal, and 3) Conversion is ongoing. This resource offers tools to help camp staffs and speakers discuss these themes in the context of Evangelical Covenant camping experiences, biblical theology, and best practices. The hope is that such discussion inspires leaders to live more deeply into new life in Christ and to communicate the gospel faithfully.

CELEBRATING CONVERSION IN COVENANT CAMPING

Conversion in Christian Camping

Covenant camps provide safe opportunities for campers to explore discipleship. The beautiful shores of many Covenant camps make it easy to imagine Jesus walking toward the buddy board during swim time and calling out, “Come and follow me!” Whether experienced through the focused time that campers receive from their counselors or through the beauty of God’s natural world or the love and care of the whole staff, campers sense God’s call on their lives in tangible ways. The scenario of Jesus calling from the shore may seem far-fetched, yet the call to discipleship is exactly what camps emulate by encouraging campers to consider discipleship. Discipleship is connected with using one’s gifts for God’s church, and camps are places for these gifts for discipleship to be noticed and cultivated.

Covenant camps provide an intensive place for campers to respond to God. Camp programs are intentional about teaching campers about God and allowing campers to respond to the good news of Jesus Christ. God’s glory is visibly present in creation, and the natural surroundings of Covenant camps proclaim God in unique ways. The beauty of creation and the lack of normal distractions provide campers with a place to relate to God and others in ways that do not easily happen at home. Most importantly, the intensive time spent in the midst of God’s good creation offers a place for God to “speak” and for campers to be receptive. Covenant camps make good use of creation as it reflects God’s love and care.

Covenant camps provide environments for campers to grow in faith. Many camps refer to next steps of faith in their mission statements, and such missions lie at the heart of ongoing conversion. Especially for those campers who have previously been introduced to Christ or who have made commitments in the past, Christian camping focuses on challenging campers to think about who they are as God's child and how they can be co-workers in God's mission. Spiritual practices, such as prayer, show campers that they are participants in their relationship with God. When ongoing conversion and discipleship are linked with the everyday joys of life and the thoughtful commitments that campers make in response to God's grace, it is easy to see why camps have played such a formative role in the life of God's church.

for reflection and discussion

Journal about how you came to understand your gifts as they serve God's church.

- How were they encouraged or supported?
- How did camps or other environments play a role in coming to understand your gifts and vocation?
- How do the stories enrich your understanding of conversion?

Discuss your reflections in small groups and then discuss concrete ways you might discern, notice, and encourage campers' gifts and vocation for the church.

Conversion in the Covenant

Conversion in the Covenant is expressed through the gift of stories. Stories bring communities to life. Imagine sitting around a fire on the last evening of camp. Often the highlight of the week, campers and staffers gather around to pray, sing, and tell stories about the week. Sometimes, the story teller proclaims good news: This is what God did in my life this week! Isn't God wonderful? A testimony is a story that conveys a return to God—whether for the first time or in a new way. A testimony marks a camper's journey of new life and sets the week apart as God's gift.

Conversion in the Covenant is expressed through the community's diversity of stories. The Covenant Church has a history of celebrating diverse stories and has found camps to be particularly supportive environments for connecting with God and one another. Because the Covenant is open to God's Spirit working in the world in different and surprising ways, there is no formula for these stories. Sometimes, a child who has been baptized begins to own her faith when she experiences God's love through her counselor. Other times, an un-churched child comes to camp and realizes that Jesus is good news! Another youth seeking to find her place in the world may come to know the love of God through her interaction with the natural environment. These are some examples of the many ways that God's gifts of sacraments, community, and nature form the fabric of diverse stories.

Conversion in the Covenant is expressed through ongoing stories. "How goes it with your walk?" ask many Covenanters of each other. Our daily walk changes and grows over time. Salvation, in other words, is a journey. Salvation in Covenant theology and history is both a moment in time (new birth) as well as an ongoing event (new life). The moment in time connects with God's work in Jesus Christ in history. The ongoing event of God's salvific work connects with the Holy Spirit working to transform God's people and incorporate us into God's life. Our changing conversion stories offer a reminder that new life in Christ is daily work and a way to hold one another accountable to our new births.

for reflection and discussion

Journal about your conversion story, reflecting on the particular contexts in which you experienced God's love and grace. What was powerful, mysterious, or engaging about the people or places that shape your story?

Discuss your story with one other person, and reflect on one or two ways your stories connect and differ. Take time in prayer to offer thanksgiving to God for each other's stories.

CELEBRATING CONVERSION IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Conversion is a Gift from God

Salvation is a gift from God, and conversion grows out of this gift. How do we know this? First, God gave himself to us in human form. Jesus Christ reveals God's desire for relationship with us. In addition, Jesus welcomes God's kingdom and includes the possibility of salvation for all—not only the Jews. Moreover, Jesus identifies with humanity's brokenness so fully that he undergoes death on the cross only to be raised to life and incorporate us into God's triune life. The loving community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the power and source of all conversions.

The church is the soil that nurtures the gift of conversion. No one is a convert or a disciple alone. God calls communities to do his work together. He gives the gift of baptism so that we may have new identities and the gift of the Lord's Supper as sustenance for the journey. Both are gifts to the church. Some wonderful ways to think about the church include: the body of Christ, ecclesia (called out by God), community of disciples, mystical communion, and friends of Jesus. Each of these emphasize that the church is not solely a human institution – it is ordained by God. Local churches and Christian camps each reflect God's church in unique and cooperative ways.

for reflection and discussion

Reflect further on your conversion story, and in particular the ways your conversion is gift, communal, and ongoing. Discuss the following questions:

- How do these themes of gift, community, and ongoing show up in your story?
- How do these themes reflect or challenge your understanding of conversion?

Discuss the following camp practices as they support campers' understanding of conversion as a gift from God: wording of prayers, communication of God's call on one's life, language in the songs, illustrations that are used in preaching, and categories in cabin devotions.

Conversion in the Old Testament

Conversion in the Old Testament is a return to God. God "woos" humanity back to himself, and these efforts are directed toward Israel as a community. Even when God calls individuals, such as Esther or David, they represent the whole people of Israel. Esther's faith is the vehicle through which God saves his people from destruction and reminds the Israelites that God desires their salvation. David's restoration is not his alone but the restoration of a people.

Conversion in the Old Testament is an ongoing one. Even those who know God turn away from him. Conversion is more than a one-time decision, and, as the prophets proclaim, Israel's re-turning happens over and over. Moreover, conversion occurs as an insider event—God knows his chosen people will turn away, and yet he remains faithful to those whom he calls his own.

Conversion in the Old Testament frames the purposes of conversion as faithful worship and the blessing of all nations and peoples. The prophet Micah, for example, connects true worship of God with justice and kindness (6:8). Amos realizes that Israel is not being faithful because her worship is not genuine. He also tethers conversion to true worship and faithful living.

for reflection and discussion

Read the story of Jonah (Jonah 1-4). Write down the major themes in the story. Discuss the following questions:

- How is conversion, or return to God, illustrated in the story?
- How does the story connect with 1) the themes of God's initiation of love, 2) God's call to a community, and 3) the ongoing nature of conversion?
- How does the story enrich your understanding of conversion?

Conversion in the New Testament

Conversion in the New Testament incorporates outsiders. God's call to faithfulness includes the Jews but also encompasses the Gentiles. Jesus's mission to Gentile regions models the broad inclusivity that is the Christian faith. None are beyond God's saving work, and the expansive inclusivity of God's Kingdom marks a new liberating aspect of God's salvific work.

Conversion in the New Testament focuses on the transformation of identity. Paul's letters use the imagery of new creation and new life emphasizing God's gift of grace. Without it, the newness of life cannot happen. With it, our whole identity is transformed. The language of "Christian" is not used much in the New Testament, but the power of God's grace to birth the new is frequent, especially in Paul. Once formed, new identity in Christ bears fruit over time.

Conversion in the New Testament takes a variety of forms. Perhaps the most interesting collection of conversion stories emerges from the book of Acts. In numerous ways and in diverse circumstances, many come to know Christ. While no paradigm for conversion exists, the one common thread in all of the stories is that persons and households are baptized. In both Acts and the gospel narratives, baptism is a gift from God that represents God's initiation of love tied with the promise that grace will turn us back toward the original way that God has intended for followers of Christ.

for reflection and discussion

Read the stories of Paul and Peter's conversion experiences (Acts 9, Luke 5:1-11, Matt 4:18-22). Discuss the following questions:

- How is conversion, or return to God, illustrated in their stories?
- How does each story connect with 1) the themes of God's initiation of love, 2) God's call to a community, and 3) the ongoing nature of conversion?
- How do the stories enrich your understanding of conversion?



CELEBRATING CONVERSION IN ACTION

Five Best Ideas and Practices

Beyond a spiritual program that builds solely toward an "altar call" response, best practices should include efforts to deepen our campers' experience of **1) Conversion as a gift, 2) Conversion as communal, and 3) Conversion as ongoing.** Consider how to equip staff and guest speakers to provide holy moments or environments through these ideas and practices.

1

The story of Scripture is one where God initiates his love for us in creation. Sin comes after God's initial extension of love, and so we encourage the focus on God's love not initially as a response to sin, but as the very heart of who God is. We never scare or try to coerce campers into our designs for them. Rather, we seek to woo campers toward God's love.

Practices: Memorize scripture together, help campers articulate their questions about life and faith while upholding complexity, listen to their stories, encourage thankfulness, name ways they have been loved, share communion.

2

Christ's resurrection is the heart of the good news. The resurrection, as opposed to Christ's death, is the power through which we are saved. We take sin seriously, and we also realize that children and youth internalize the concept of sin and guilt in ways that are unique and different than adults.

Practices: Respect the developmental stages of campers, offer the gospel in ways that are age appropriate (see sources below), ask "Why am I teaching this particular point and how does it relate to the good news that Christ is risen?," share the realities of brokenness in our world and the miracles of transformation and healing.

3

The Godhead is a community (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)—three persons, one God. As images of God, we are created in and for relationship, and so conversion applies to right relations to God and to others. Conversion encompasses not only to individuals and their personal decisions and gifts but also as individuals are connected to the community of faith (both in their local church and the broader Christian church).

Practices: Model discipleship through mentoring relationships, pray together, read/discuss scripture small groups, offer services of healing prayer, share your conversion story, dream about how each's passions might serve the Kingdom of God, extend God's love through tangible care and acts of encouragement.

4

Each person matures in faith in different ways. We preach, teach, and care toward the end of encouraging campers in their next step of faith, whatever that might be. There is no "one size fits all," model of conversion. We never give them reasons to doubt the validity of any of their previous experiences or decisions, but encourage them to rely on God's promises in Scripture.

Practices: Create space for campers to share journeys of faith verbally, visually, or through other creative ways, celebrate each as a gift, teach about baptism in the context of their local church help campers remember baptismal promises, affirm past camp experiences, help campers identify the difference between "rededicating" or starting all over again each summer and ongoing conversion.

5

Next steps of faith are conversions. They are evidence of God's work and cause for rejoicing. With the hopes that campers articulate and own their decisions and with the knowledge that the Holy Spirit works in a variety of ways, we encourage campers to grow in their understanding of their service to Christ's mission.

Practices: Help campers identify tangible ways to live out their new life in Christ at home, relate their experiences to Jesus' teachings, name gifts that you see in each camper and encourage campers to do the same for each other, dream about how their gifts can serve Christ's mission, offer prayers of blessing for each camper, celebrate them!

for reflection and discussion

Considering how word choices shape conversion experiences, discuss how the following phrases might confuse campers, fall short of a biblical understanding of conversion, or even impede a camper's next step of faith:

- Ask Jesus into your heart (consider the holistic nature of conversion)
- Are you saved? (consider the ongoing nature of salvation)

- Have you been born again? (consider new birth in the present as connected with new life)
- Make a one-time decision for Jesus (consider that discipleship requires multiple, daily decisions)
- Accept Jesus as your personal savior (consider how one's faith is communal and connected with the larger church)

CONVERSION: WHAT IS IT?

Conversion is a series of turning toward God. It is receiving God's gift of grace and committing one's life to following Jesus Christ. Conversion is growing in faith, and therefore there is always a "next step." Conversion does not actually save us, because conversion is a human response. God's extension of love through Jesus Christ is what saves us, and God invites us to receive this redemptive gift of himself. The hope is that Christians continue to receive God's love and grace and to be converted, or transformed, by it. Perhaps it is more accurate to say "conversions" as we celebrate ongoing conversions in the life of believers!

SOURCES OF FURTHER STUDY

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