# 2nd Opinion: ‘He Tells Me I Am His Own?’ Maybe …

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In his 1736 treatise, “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God,” Jonathan Edwards described conversion as “a great and glorious work of God’s power, at once changing the heart of infusing life into the dead soul though that grace that is then implanted does more gradually display itself in some than in others. But as to fixing on the precise time when they put forth the very first act of grace, there is a great deal of difference in different persons.”

Bill LeonardEdwards observed certain common steps in the conversions at his church in Northampton, Mass. It began with a sense of dependence on God, followed by deep conviction of sinfulness. Next came terror over one’s spiritually bankrupt condition, accompanied by an awareness of God’s terrible judgment.

Gradually—if one were in the elect—the sinner recognized God had graciously bestowed salvation. These steps linked the objective idea of God’s desire to save sinners with a tangible experience in sinful human beings. Edwards’ observations became a guide for those seeking to secure salvation and authenticate it, a major concern of many 18th-century evangelicals. Three centuries later, we may wonder if it still is.

Two new poll—if polls are any indication—suggest increasing apprehension among "white evangelicals" that their message seems to have lost viability or intensity in American culture. The American Values Survey for 2014 indicates white evangelicals, who comprise 20 percent of the population, are in a statistical dead heat with "nones," those who claim no religious affiliation (19 percent).

Another study from the Pew Research Center suggests while 31 percent of the general population believes "significant discrimination" exists toward evangelicals, 50 percent of evangelicals surveyed believe that to be the case.

**Seven straight years of SBC baptism declines**

These studies are compounded by a report from the Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest Protestant/evangelical denomination, indicating seven straight years of decline in baptisms. The report also documented a significant drop in the number of teenagers and young adults receiving baptism in SBC churches, and noted the only age group showing baptismal increase last year came from children 5 years of age and younger.

For a believers' church like the SBC to have its only baptismal growth among preschoolers compounds the evangelical dilemma. In 21st-century America, what exactly is the Christian message and who's listening?

If "personal experience with Christ" is normative, how is it secured? As once-burgeoning evangelical communions experience serious numerical decline, some wonder if the culture is out to get them. Others ask if their vision of faith is simply missing the culture altogether.

As denominations, revivalism and conversionistic transactionalism wane, even in evangelical churches, might it be time to revisit the nature of Christian religious experience? If Edwards could do that in colonial culture,

surely postmodern American culture requires similar consideration.

**Faith ‘tangibilified’**

At the center of Christian religious experience in every era is the intricate, elusive relationship between divine transcendence and immanence, the idea God who is “high and lifted up” and “immortal and invisible” “became flesh” in Jesus Christ, “God with us.” How does the objective idea God loves the world enter subjectively into individuals? If faith alone determines salvation, how is that faith “tangibilified—Father Divine’s term?

Jesus may “walk with me and talk with me, and tell me I am his own,” as the hymn suggests, but how do I know that tangibly? All Christian traditions provide some response to those questions, detailing various routes to God through conversion experiences, authoritative teachings or sacramental rites.

Roman Catholics, it seems, “tangibilify” grace brilliantly. From the beginning of an individual’s life to the end, the sacramental “means of grace” unite transcendence and immanence in common elements of water, bread, wine and oil, and in common human experiences of birth, aging, vocation, repentance, reconciliation and death.

Through these “outward” signs, God’s sacred presence literally enters into the human through the material. In the Eucharist, grace is ingested tangibly by consuming the very body and blood of Jesus Christ through the miracle of transubstantiation. Faithful Catholics know Christ has come to them because they literally “feed on him.”

The Protestant Reformers reasserted sola fides—faith alone—for salvation, and set about devising multiple plans and propositions for securing salvation, often with less tangible means of assurance.

**Questions abound**

In America, revivals and awakenings became occasions for drawing people to faith and became highly successful means of grace for generations of evangelical Christians. As numbers of people distance themselves from the nurture and evangelical witness of the church, now what? In light of these sociological and theological realities, questions abound:

- Might evangelicals stop whining about the loss of cultural privilege and engage the culture with a renewed vigor?

- If minority status prevails, what might be the elements of communal and individual Christian witness, even toward those indifferent or hostile to the gospel?

- When faith communities engage the culture prophetically, might they expect not to be privileged by that same culture?

- And what about Jesus? If Jesus is the link between God's transcendence and immanence, then why not rethink the way the church tells and represents the Jesus story in the world?

- What if God's New Day really has come near, and almost nobody, including the church, noticed?

*Bill Leonard is the James and Marilyn Dunn Professor of Church History and Baptist Studies at Wake Forest University's School of Divinity. His "Can I Get a Witness?" column appears biweekly at ABPnews.com.*