

Biblical Convictions: Strongly-Held Beliefs and Their Consequences¹

1: Foundations of Biblical Convictions

At the very beginning of the church, Christians were confronted with a choice. Christianity was becoming a threat to the Roman Empire, and so Caesar devised a loyalty test. He decreed that everyone should offer a pinch of incense and say “Caesar is Lord.” If they did that, everything was fine. If they refused to do it, they would face persecution and even death.

If you were a Christian in that era, would you offer a pinch of incense to Caesar to avoid persecution and death, or would you stand on your strongly-held belief that Jesus is Lord? You could easily lie, make the required statement, burn the pinch of incense, and avoid all the trouble. Or you could retain your belief, refuse to capitulate, and suffer the consequences. Do you stand on your convictions or do you compromise?

In our modern world, we may be tempted to go along with the crowd just to avoid offending others. We may be afraid to stand up for what we believe in the face of opposition or hostility.

It should be obvious that Christians cannot, in good faith, offer a pinch of incense to Caesar and call him “lord.” That would be idolatry; it would be a denial of Jesus. We cannot affirm falsehood. We must retain our commitment to the true and living God and to God’s Word as absolute, unchanging truth. We know the truth, and we cannot compromise it. Christians throughout the ages have stood strongly for their beliefs without compromise, and they have often faced death for retaining these beliefs.

Based on biblical truth, believers develop strongly-held beliefs—what we might call “convictions”—to guide their behavior. And we hold these beliefs tenaciously, without compromise, no matter what the cost may be.

Proverbs 28:1 ... *the righteous are bold as a lion.*

1Co 16:13 *Watch, stand fast in the faith, act like men, be strong.*

Our Summer Sermon Series this year will focus on biblical convictions. What are they and how do we develop them?

This first message will lay a foundation for biblical convictions. And we’ll start where we often do with...

I. Definitions

A. Conviction means “the act or process of convincing,” “the state of being convinced,” or “a fixed or strong belief.”

1. Conviction is essentially confidence that something is true; a strong persuasion or belief.

¹ Some of this material is based on a Bible study series originally produced by Wayne Vawter at Rock Lake Baptist Church, Lake Mills, WI, in the 1980s. Modified and compiled by Brad Anderson, Liberty Baptist Church, Antigo, WI, 2013, 2025.

2. Conviction is the polar opposite of doubt, uncertainty, and skepticism. You don't have a conviction about something doubtful or uncertain. You have a conviction about something you believe to be absolutely true.
3. By *biblical* conviction, we mean strongly-held beliefs derived from and based on the teachings of Scripture. The Word of God is the absolute guide for all of life, faith and behavior. Christians are convinced of this fact.
4. If God's Word is true and authoritative, then we must absolutely follow it without compromise. We don't have a choice. We cannot ignore "thus saith the Lord." We cannot compromise the truth.

B. Convictions are not the same as preferences or personal standards.

1. Preferences and standards flow from convictions but are not the same as convictions.
2. A *preference* is simply a belief or behavior that appeals to you personally. You like it; you think it's good, but it's not much more than a personal opinion. E.g., times of worship service, children's programs.

You would be willing to compromise on a preference; you could bend; you could be flexible on preferences. Your level of certainty regarding preferences is rather low. Different people have different preferences, and that's fine.
3. A *standard* is a bit stronger than a preference. Typically, standards describe behaviors that you think of as right or required. Standards are typically based on morality. E.g., alcohol, gambling, modesty.

You would not want to compromise a standard. Your level of certainty is fairly high on standards. People may disagree with you on these, but that does not matter; you still hold your standard.
4. *Convictions*, as we define them here, would be the strongest held of our commitments because they are the most clearly biblical. E.g., salvation through faith in Jesus, marriage between a man and a woman.

There is no room for compromise on convictions. Your level of certainty is extremely high on these issues. You are not willing to budge an inch unless you can be shown from Scripture.
5. God's Word gives us our principles, on which we develop convictions, standards, and preferences. Convictions are our most strongly-held beliefs, standards are proper applications of those beliefs, and preferences are what we would prefer based on our beliefs.

C. What convictions are not:

1. A conviction is not a feeling or an internal sense about certain issues or practices. Sometimes we say something like, "That sermon was really convicting." Or "I was under conviction during that message." That's not really what I'm talking about. Conviction in the sense that I'm talking about is not a feeling of guilt or of failure.

2. A conviction is not an emotional feeling about something. A conviction is a strongly-held belief based on clear biblical teaching. It's more rational than emotional; a belief, not a feeling.

Someone described it this way: Biblical conviction is the product of three things that characterize a mature Christian: (a) a commitment to Scripture as one's authority, (b) the construction of specific beliefs and standards based on that authority, and (c) the courage to act on those strongly-held beliefs by faith.²

Trans: A biblical conviction is a strongly-held belief in a clear teaching of Scripture that we cannot compromise. On such issues, Christians must simply believe and obey whatever God tells us.

II. The Biblical Basis for Having Convictions

How do we know that we should have convictions? Maybe we should be open to compromise. Maybe we should be less strict, less absolute on these things.

Some people claim that strongly-held beliefs create all kinds of problems. People fight over strongly-held beliefs. Fellow Christians are divided over different strongly-held beliefs. So maybe we should hold our beliefs more tentatively with greater doubt and less certainty.

No, the Bible demands that we hold some beliefs very strongly.

A. The Bible frequently exhorts us to hold our biblical beliefs strongly.

1. Some commands exhort us to "hold fast" our beliefs.

1Th 5:21 *Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.*

2Th 2:15 *Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.*

2Ti 1:13 *Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me,*
...

Heb 10:23 *Let us hold fast the profession of [our] faith without wavering...*

Re 3:3 *Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. ...*

The words for "hold fast" (κατέχω κρατέω τηρέω) mean "to keep secure, to keep firm possession of," "to keep carefully and faithfully, to continue to hold, to retain."

We are obligated to retain our belief in the clear teachings of God's word. We should have strong beliefs regarding doctrine and regarding proper behavior.

B. The Bible exhorts us not to compromise on our biblical beliefs.

Galatians 1:6 *I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel,*

² J. Hampton Keathley III, Biblical Studies Foundation, *Marks of Maturity*

We must not compromise on the Gospel. Any inappropriate addition to the faith makes it “another gospel.” We simply must not compromise on some of our beliefs.

- C. The Bible exhorts us to stand strongly for the faith.

Eph 6:10 *Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.*

Eph 6:13 *Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.*

We learn the proper belief and then we stand for it strongly. We stand strongly against any threats or errors regarding the faith.

- D. The Bible exhorts us to contend for the faith.

Jude 3 ... *contend earnestly* (ἐπαγωνίζομαι) *for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.*

I.e., to struggle, to enter into combat. We do this earnestly, intensively, fervently.

The Bible uses the imagery of fighting as a soldier or competing as an athlete to describe the Christian life. We must hold the truth tenaciously, not tentatively.

- E. Other passages indicate the need to hold strongly to the faith:

Rom 12:9 ... *Abhor that which is evil; cling to that which is good.*

1Cor 15:58 ... *be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, ...*

Heb 3:14 *For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast* (βέβαιος – stable, firm) *unto the end.*

Trans: Some of the commands and expectations that God give us in his word are absolute. There is no compromise on these foundational issues. We must obey without compromise. We must hold these beliefs strongly.

It is no virtue to hold our beliefs tentatively, weakly, or doubtfully. We have the right and obligation to hold our beliefs with fervor, certainty, and strength. When we hold our beliefs strongly and without compromise, we have convictions.

III. Developing Convictions

- A. Convictions begin with salvation and assurance of it.

1. Unsaved people may have strongly-held beliefs. Non-Christians may be more absolute and unmovable in their beliefs than Christians are. E.g. sports teams, political opinions
2. But non-Christians don't believe in Jesus—that's why they are unsaved. They don't accept biblical teaching. So they don't have *biblical* convictions. They don't typically believe the Bible.
3. Christians believe what God has said; they believe the Bible. They believe in Jesus. We have strongly-held beliefs in Jesus and in the Bible. These beliefs form our convictions.

4. And only Christians have the Spirit of God within them. The work of the Spirit is to convict us of sin and righteousness and judgment (Jn 16:8).
- B. Convictions develop when we recognize that Scripture is inspired, inerrant, and authoritative. The Bible is our guide for every aspect of life (2 Pet 1:20-21; 2 Tim 3:16). Scripture must be our standard for thinking. We must use the Word to filter everything that comes into our minds so we can bring every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). Scripture always takes priority over our opinions, experiences, and feelings.
- C. Convictions come from the study, interpretation, and proper application of the Bible. This means we must become careful students who seek to rightly handle the Word (2 Tim 2:15). The higher our view of the Bible, the more painstaking and conscientious our commitment, study, and application of it should be.

We admit that our convictions are based on our interpretation of Scripture. However, most true convictions are based on biblical teaching that is abundantly clear. Convictions are based on frequent, clear biblical statements. Our convictions should not be subject to the complaint, “That’s just your interpretation.” Convictions should be based on the beliefs that all Christians agree are biblical and right.

IV. The Dangers of Compromise

- A. Compromise occurs anytime we substitute our own desires for clear biblical principle. In order to gain some benefit or advantage, we might violate biblical principles. Perhaps we convince ourselves that the ordinary rules don’t apply to us or that we deserve to be excused for our disobedience.

E.g., offering that little pinch of incense to Caesar and saying “Caesar is lord.” Many did that to avoid persecution.

Some people compromise just to avoid opposition or hostility. Some people compromise in order to be popular, to go along with the crowd.

Others compromise in response to temptation. A series of small compromises can add up to huge consequences (e.g., David).
- B. A conviction *ought to be* so strongly held that we would never violate it. A conviction is a belief held so strongly that compromise is not an option. We don’t bend on principle. Convictions are non-negotiable—at least in theory.
- C. In reality, under the right set of pressures or temptations, we might not be so strong. We might violate our convictions in spite of the fact that we know we are committing sin.

E.g., David knew that what he was doing with Bathsheba was sinful, but he did it anyways. Human nature is so weak and corrupt that we may indeed violate our own deeply-held beliefs.

Because of human weakness and failure, people do sometimes violate their own convictions. And they might even excuse themselves for doing so. But in theory at least, convictions ought to be so strong that we would never violate them. For our strongest convictions, we might be willing to face death rather than violate them.

V. Examples of People with the Courage of Their Convictions

- A. Daniel (Dan 1:1-8) – purposed he would not defile himself with the king’s food and drink.
- B. Joseph (Gen 39:7-12) – ran away from the temptation of Potiphar’s wife.
- C. The prophets (e.g., Jeremiah) – all the prophets withstood hostility and opposition as they preached repentance to stubborn people.
- D. John the Baptist (Mark 6:18) – rebuked King Herod for his immorality.
- E. Stephen (Acts 6-7) – stood up boldly against opposition and gave his life for Christ.

Such people were not willing to compromise on their convictions. They were not willing to bend, and they suffered for their convictions. They held their beliefs very strongly, they told people what they believed, and that led to persecution and even death. But they never compromised.

VI. Do Not Base Convictions on Non-Essentials

As I said, convictions should be based on clear, fundamental biblical teaching, which means that we don’t base convictions on unclear teaching or disputed teaching.

A significant error for some people is that they develop strongly held convictions in areas that, frankly, do not have biblical warrant. We should not base our convictions on things about which the Bible is silent or indifferent.

A. Definition of “non-essential”

- 1. If the Bible neither commands nor forbids an action, these are matters of indifference. Theologians call such things *adiaphora*—neither commanded nor forbidden. The behavior is a matter of indifference. On such issues, believers have the right to determine for themselves what is appropriate.

Good people will develop different standards or preferences on such non-essential issues. We do not have the right to enforce conformity or uniformity on non-essentials. We can make recommendations or give advice, but not compel behavior in these areas.

Rom 14:5 *One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.*

Col 2:16 *Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days:*

Some things are just plain non-essential. It does not matter which way you go on these things. We have freedom to choose one way or the other.

We can have preferences in these areas and perhaps even personal standards, but not convictions.

2. Further, within the Bible are some matters that are not so clear.
 - a) Some things are unclear as to *what God originally meant*. E.g. baptism for the dead
 - b) Some things are unclear as to *how or if the command or principle should be applied today*. E.g. head coverings
3. Due to human weakness and the Bible's lack of clarity, people will differ as to their understanding and application of certain principles.
4. We want to avoid developing rock-hard convictions on those issues that are non-essential, areas where there is flexibility and wiggle room. We may have standards and preferences on these areas, but it's an error to raise such issues to the level of convictions.

B. Biblical Non-Essentials

The biblical authors themselves sometimes tell us when an issue has little or no spiritual significance. On all such issues, we should allow wide tolerance for differences.

1. Food/diet (Mark 7:19 [NASB]; Rom 14:3, 14; 1 Cor 8:8; Col 2:16)
 NT Christians are not under the OT dietary laws (cf. Acts 15:10, 19). All food may be eaten if it is "received with thanksgiving" because it is "sanctified by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim 4:4-5).
2. Holidays/worship days/observing the Sabbath (Rom 14:6; Col 2:16)
 - a) The biblical pattern for worship suggests that believers ought to assemble for worship and fellowship on Sundays—the Lord's Day (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10)
 - b) However, any day or every day is suitable for worship. The day a church chooses to assemble should not be a major issue. Nor should the observance of religious holidays or festivals.
3. Circumcision (Rom 2:29; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6)
 This ritual was an important part of Jewish identity, yet it has no spiritual significance in the NT era. Families have total latitude in this area.
4. Giving (2 Cor 9:7)
 The amount or percentage of one's giving is a private matter between the individual, his family, and the Lord. Giving at least a tithe has good biblical precedent, but the NT does not seem to require a particular level of giving. We should give generously, cheerfully, sacrificially, and proportionally; but the NT does not set a specific amount.
5. Marriage (1 Cor 7)

One's decision to get married or to remain single is a personal one. Either way has its own set of costs and benefits. Obviously, once a person is married, certain convictions come into play; but the decision to get married or not remains a matter of liberty.

6. Other personal and family choices

We make many choices as individuals and as families that may be different from what others choose to do. E.g., we may have different standards of dress or music or Bible version. In these areas, we may develop personal standards that we will not violate, while at the same time, others don't hold those standards. E.g., movie attendance.

If the Bible does not contain very clear and strong statements on the issue in view, it's likely that you should not have a strong conviction regarding that issue. You may have an opinion or preference about it, but that's not the same as a biblical conviction. There is a difference between a preference and a conviction. For biblical convictions, you have to have strong chapter-and-verse support, not merely personal opinion.

All Christians should have strong convictions regarding various elements of the Christian faith. These are matters that we will not budge on; there is no wiggle room, no room for compromise. On matters of true biblical conviction, we should, in some cases, be willing to die for our beliefs. Many thousands of fellow believers have died for their biblical convictions. E.g., we will not offer the pinch of incense and say "Caesar is Lord." They would rather die than compromise.

In many areas of life, we must compromise. We must be flexible and be willing to change our views. We can hold our opinion and preferences tentatively and conditionally. But we do not have that option regarding the primary teachings of the Bible. On such things, we stand on our convictions without compromise.