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Conversion

THEOLOGY, NEWS AND NOTES ■ JUNE 1986

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CONVERSION: A Way of Living

by Edmund (Eddie) Gibbs

'Conversion' is a key term in the vocabulary of the evangelical Christian. As the concept plays such a significant role in both our theology and experience it is important that its depth and breadth be adequately appreciated. This issue of **Theology, News and Notes** is devoted to the theme of conversion. Its intention is to increase our awareness of the radical nature and complexity of the conversion process by examining it from a variety of perspectives.

In the Christian usage of the term, conversion is one way of describing the individual's initial turning to Christ. It underscores the fact that such a turning is understood as a complete about-face rather than a minor course-correction in the pathway of life. It expresses both continuity and discontinuity with the former mode of life. If conversion signifies the human act of turning in response to the call of God, then regeneration provides the complementary truth of God's gracious initiative emanating from the Father who planned our salvation, from the Son who implemented it, and from the Holy Spirit who applies its benefits to all in every generation. As this issue of **Theology, News and Notes** is concerned with the conversion aspect of our salvation, it will of necessity be a one-sided presentation. While recognizing the vital work of the Holy Spirit to make genuine conversion possible, our major focus will be on the ramifications of this work of God as it is encouraged,

frustrated or diverted by the varied efforts of people involved in the process.

We begin with five personal accounts of people whose lives were turned around as a consequence of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. The individuals were specially selected to represent the widest range of backgrounds in terms of nationality, culture and religious orientation. One testimony is from an Indian who was formerly a Hindu. Another is from an African brought up in an animistic culture. Yet another is by a Brazilian who had been dabbling in spiritism. Each of their stories demonstrates how the living Christ met them at their point of need. Such variety cautions us against trying either to codify or stereotype the experience. Some people are converted as an immediate consequence of recognizing Christ as their sin-bearer. Others initially turn to Christ, not so much out of a sense of the need for forgiveness, as a need for strength in a time of confessed weakness and inadequacy. Their awareness of sin and the need for forgiveness comes later as a subsequent realization.

Whether or not there was an acute awareness of the pain and guilt of sin prior to conversion, this recognition intensifies following any genuine conversion experience which has been brought about by the Holy Spirit. Increasingly we come to recognize what it cost the sinless Son of God to identify with us to the extent of bearing our sins, and with that realization our love and gratitude increases proportionately.

The conversion experience must first be understood biblically and theologically, otherwise we will be in

danger of regarding it merely as a fresh burst of religious enthusiasm or of explaining it purely in terms of psychological conditioning. Only when we have a clear theological grasp will we be equipped to discern the valid from the spurious, and be qualified to play a more adequate role in helping others through the conversion experience. But biblical exegesis does not represent the whole of the task, for other academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology and anthropology also make a significant contribution.

One of the recorded testimonies especially reminds us that conversion should be viewed as a process as well as an event. There are those who have grown up within a Christian family environment who cannot remember a time when they did not love the Lord Jesus. What then does 'conversion' mean to someone who cannot recollect a day when they turned from darkness to light? And, in the case of those who do have a dramatic story to tell, was not God's hand already in their life leading them to that decisive turning point? In either instance, conversion is as much process as event.

Furthermore, at subsequent stages of our Christian pilgrimage, as we come to a deeper self-understanding through the searchings of the Holy Spirit, we are made aware that there

“...conversion should be viewed as a process as well as an event...the process which began before our initial turning must continue for long afterwards.”

are yet unyielded areas of our life which still need converting. So the process which began before our initial turning must continue for long afterwards.

In any discussion of the topic three questions must be raised. The first is, From what were we converted? The second is, To what were we converted? And thirdly, What role does the human agent play in a person's conversion to Christ and the gospel?

Whether a convert comes to Christ from animism, one of the great theistic non-Christian faiths, Marxism, secular-humanism, nominal-Christianity or from within an authentic, vital Christian environment will have a profound impact on the nature of the conversion experience, and upon the issues which were uppermost at that time. The witness and evangelist cannot therefore simply confront all with a pre-packaged conversion program. The essential starting point is first to discover what God has begun to do in the individual's life, and to take it from there.

Some people need subsequent conversion experiences even more traumatic than their initial 'born again' experience because the message they were given was only a narrow slice of the gospel as we find it spelled out in the gospels. When the gospel presentation is confined to the need to 'receive Jesus', to the exclusion of his becoming Lord of the person's life, and omits to explain the indwelling and enabling of the Holy Spirit, then the stage has been set for trouble

from the outset. We have created the need for a 'part-two' presentation.

True conversion requires the opportunity to hear the gospel clearly presented. Recognizing that eternal issues are at stake, motivated by the compassion of Christ, and sensing the urgency of the occasion, the Christian advocate will endeavor to be as persuasive as possible. How far should the advocate go in attempting to convince and persuade? When does persuasion become manipulation? As a number of court cases in different parts of the world evidence, these questions are of more than academic or pastoral interest.

The conversion process, which is complex enough between people in the same cultural setting, becomes even more complex when the gospel is presented in a cross-cultural setting. The gospel can be so identified with a particular culture that it becomes more of a mirror of those cultural values than a light to expose and transform. Consequently the gospel communicator inadvertently presents an acculturated form of the gospel, which means that it has been shaped and perhaps distorted by the context from which the communicator comes. As a consequence, the message may appear foreign and irrelevant to the person from another culture. We must never be satisfied with our culturally edited form of the gospel, for to the extent we settle for less than the full-orbed message, we will become inept within our own culture and irrelevant to any other.

The purpose of this introduction is not to supply answers but to raise questions. If issues have begun to surface, making you realize that there

was more to conversion than you realized, then I invite you to read on as our specialist contributors bring their expertise to bear and as each considers the conversion process from their distinctive perspective. ■

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CONVERSION: Five in the Process

I was born into an Orthodox Hindu family in India. Christ was a total stranger to me as a little girl. My community taught me that Christ was a "Christian God," especially the "white man's" God, and as Hindus we were to have nothing to do with Christ or Christians. My family background and community were Hindu, and as such, I was raised in a typical Hindu atmosphere.

Though born in the city of Bangalore in South India, I was mostly raised to the north, in the State of Uttar Pradesh in the city of Kanpur. With the intention of giving us the best schooling in town my parents sent us to a Christian mission school. While studying there I was faced with the problem of a grandmother with incurable cancer. She was taken to many gods and goddesses and to many temples and shrines with no result. Medical doctors had also washed their hands of the case. My heart searched for an omnipotent God throughout the universe who had power to heal cancer. It was at that time that I heard the gospel of deliverance from sin and disease through Christ Jesus, through a missionary who preached at our school for one continuous week. I was convicted of my sins and gave my heart and life to Christ at the age of eleven. Though miles away my grandmother was prayed for and the missionary left me with a precious copy of the New Testament.

After a month I received news that my grandmother was completely healed. This miracle came as a con-

firmation of Christ's power to me, and strengthened my faith in the Lord. Thus, I embarked on my Christian pilgrimage totally ignorant of the Bible at that particular stage. I was denied church, Sunday school and any kind of Christian fellowship. In spite of these restrictions I was able to grow in the faith because God chose other ways to communicate to me. He spoke to me sometimes through dreams, sometimes through visions. He gave me foreknowledge of things that were going to happen in the family and quickened the New Testament as I read it. He also later baptized me with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4). The Lord's presence was very real to me.

Awareness of my faith in the Lord on the part of relatives and friends did not make things easy for me. Immediate family members were the first to notice the change. They objected to the picture of Christ which hung in my room. They objected to my reading the New Testament and praying to Christ. They tried to drag me back to the temples and old gods, fearing punishment from them. As a young college student, friends and college mates disassociated with me. They looked down upon me because of my faith. There were times when I was deserted and lonely, but the joy of the Lord was my strength.

On completion of my Master's Degree, I was ready to leave the academic world with high hopes and ambitions for a secure and prosperous future. It was at that time that I heard the greatest call of my life. I heard the Lord of the harvest calling me to labor in his vineyard. I was obedient to his call and surrendered totally to him. Ever since conversion I had prayed

earnestly for the salvation of my loved ones, and the need was urgent if I was to enter into Christian ministry. Just before I entered seminary the Lord miraculously saved my mother, three brothers, and two sisters, and baptized all of them with the Holy Spirit. Commitment to Christ on the part of so many family members antagonized my unsaved father and two brothers, who separated themselves from us, cutting off all contact. This was the anti-climax of our suffering since such separation is unheard of in India.

Now the Lord in his mercy has saved my father and one of my brothers, and has reunited our family for his glory. Surely these experiences have drawn me closer to the Lord, and have enabled us to know the power of his resurrection. ■

Shahini G. Palhl

“...my mother told them before she died that any of her children who became Christians would be cursed.”

I am from the Higi tribe of Northern Nigeria. I was born in a village called Yabali in the Michika Local Government area of Gongola State. At the time of my birth, Yabali had a population of 2,000. In the village the people live in a homogeneous setting according to family units. Polygamy is a legally accepted form of marriage. If death occurs in the community the whole village mourns and attends the funeral. Religious allegiances were to animism or traditional beliefs. Ancestors were thought to be living people in the after world who received veneration from the living people in this world.

In 1949, I went to a mission school which is about eight miles from my home village. My conversion came through gradual process as a result of attending the chapel service at the mission school. In November, 1956, I became a Christian. The major crisis in my life at that time was the death of my parents. My great felt need was to know who would help me and my three younger brothers now that I had lost my parents. In my own culture at that time, and even to this day, parents help their sons to get wives and also help to pay the bride price. Therefore, I worried because I lost both of my parents. I also worried about who would help me and my three brothers since I lived at the mission school most weekdays.

The Bible truth which struck my mind at that time was from Matthew 6:31-33. The preacher who spoke in our chapel on that occasion was a

pastor from another mission station. His message was on seeking the Kingdom and Fatherhood of God. He challenged the students to seek the Kingdom of God first, promising that God would provide for all their needs. What he said addressed my felt need. I told my younger brothers about it when I went back to the village on the weekend and they all agreed with what I told them.

The first problem which I had to face as a consequence of my commitment to Christ was not having anything to eat on Sundays for a whole year. The reason was that the family of my uncle, with whom we were staying after the death of my parents, wouldn't give me any food during that day because I did not work on the farm on Sunday. Instead, I went to the church service at the mission station to worship and attend baptismal class. Preparation for baptism on the mission field in the Church of the Brethren takes one year.

My uncle had four wives who threatened to drive me and my brothers out of their home, because of my commitment to Christ. They also tried to discourage me from going to the mission school and church services by saying that my mother told them before she died that any of her children who became Christians would be cursed. They also put pressure on my brothers in their home so that they would leave. One brother who couldn't take it ran away from their home, but none of these problems caused me to give up my faith.

Eventually, our uncle allowed the boys to attend the mission school during the time they were staying

with him. All my brothers are Christians today. Most are married and have children. God not only gave us wives and children but he also gave us an education which is highly valued in our country today.

After all this God somehow impressed our uncle and his wives through our lives and witness to them as well as through the conversion of all of their children to Christ. They too finally accepted Christ. Four years ago their marriages were confirmed by the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria.

During the following years the Lord has enabled me to serve him in a number of ways. He called me to serve as an evangelist in a village about 18 miles from my home village. I worked with Wycliffe Bible Translators for six years and translated the New Testament into my own language of Higi. I worked as the District Superintendent in the Higi area, which had 10 congregations and 90 preaching points, with a membership of 15,000.

After my M.A. program at Fuller Seminary (1980), I worked as a principal. At the same time I taught at Kulp Bible School in the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. I will devote the rest of my life in training church leaders and church planting in the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria. ■

John Guli

“I have experienced a conversion from being centered in the glory of Christianity to seeing more of the cross of Christ.”

I was born in a Christian family in Araguari Minas Gerais, Brazil. My father is an ordained elder of the Presbyterian Church in that country. I have three younger sisters. When I was about 12, I left the church and became involved with other things. In my heart I was looking for an ultimate truth. So I went to several kinds of religious groups: I went to Kardecism (spiritism according to the teachings of Allan Kardec), Umbanda (an Afro-Brazilian spiritism) and finally Candomblé (another Afro-Brazilian cult).

My life was very empty. I also read several books about UFOs, philosophy, and eclectic religions, but nothing helped. I was greatly influenced by the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Uriah Heep, and Pink Floyd, and sometimes I used marijuana to find some kind of spiritual experience.

I was tired of living that way. One night I in September of 1977, I was drunk and lay on my bed listening to Uriah Heep. I started reflecting on my sinful life. After that I remembered some of the Ten Commandments, and I felt the extent of my guilt before God. I was sure that I was condemned to go to hell. Since I was really tired of living, I decided to commit suicide. Meanwhile, I remembered that Jesus had taught the Lord's Prayer, and I prayed it hoping that God would have mercy upon me somehow. I cried all that night with a deep pain in my soul, but was encouraged to try something new for my life even though I didn't know specifically what.

By the following month, I found that I no longer believed in the activities at the spiritist cult in which I was involved, but I continued to attend. One Sunday the *Pai-de-Santo* (title of the sorcerer) told me that I should pay for two "obligations" (services) to the "slaves of the saints" (demons), otherwise the Devil would kill me. I was scared to death and decided to get money for the obligations. When I parked my car at the Civic Square of Goiania, I found myself directly behind my aunt's car which had a plastic sticker on its back window. I read, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." At that moment I realized how far I was from God, and I felt a brand new love for him. I said to myself, "If God is my Shepherd, why should I pay worship to Satan?" And a new life invaded my heart.

As soon as I was converted things started to change in my life. I had been engaged to a girl and that engagement was according to the spiritist ritual, so that very week it was completely called off. I had been a heavy drinker—almost dependent on alcohol—but I was delivered from that vicious habit. At that time I felt a confirmation of my vocation to become a minister of God's Word, and I was sent to seminary to study for the ministry. ■

Ethel M. Jansen

It has always been difficult for me to talk about my conversion. I get quite uncomfortable when someone asks me when I came to Christ because I do not remember ever being converted. I do not remember ever not being a Christian.

I was baptized into Christ a little less than six weeks after I was born. I was surrounded by a strong Christian family and a strong Christian community. I was raised as a Christian, being told that I was a Christian, that Jesus loved me, and that he was my Savior. I have never known anything else. God, the church, and Christianity have always been central to me.

I have been a Lutheran Christian all my life. While I am aware of how my experience of God has helped to form my theology, I am even more aware of how my Lutheran theology has shaped much of what I consider important—and remember—in my experience. I am sure that there were times in my life when an observer would have said that I was not leading a Christian life and would not have recognized me as a Christian. Yet, when I consider my life as a whole, I know I have always loved the Lord Jesus.

At times I have regretted not having had a "conversion experience." My testimony seems boring. I have missed out on that dramatic moment of dedication—that emotional time of repentance—that sudden change from one lifestyle to a new one. Quite candidly, sometimes I feel cheated by not having been able to enjoy the "fun" of the pre-conversion life. One of the difficulties of being a P.K. (preacher's kid) has been the almost constant expectation that I will be good and moral and Christian. I have been raised with that expectation and I know no other way to seek to live my life.

“...conversion is not just crisis but process. Following the initial turn around...I discovered many other areas which needed ‘converting.’”

But even though I have not had a “conversion experience,” I have had significant experiences of renewal and recommitment. My confirmation (age 15) was a very special time for me, as I (re)committed my life to Jesus and said “yes” on my own to the promises God made to me at my baptism. Towards the end of my senior year in high school (age 18) I was “filled with the Holy Spirit” and received the gift of tongues. It was an important experience in my young life, even though my theology today has led me to understand the experience from a new perspective. After a girlfriend broke up with me (age 20) I experienced a strong desire in my heart for the Word of God. I have found that relational difficulties have often led to significant spiritual experiences.

Even though I have not experienced that conversion from “being non-Christian” to “being Christian,” I have experienced numerous radical changes in my Christian lifestyle. I have experienced different types of “conversion.” I have experienced a dramatic conversion from a lifestyle of self-indulgence to one that seeks to be more concerned for the world’s hungry. I have experienced a slower conversion from being focused only on my ministry to being more focused on my family. I have experienced a conversion from being centered in the glory of Christianity to seeing more of the cross of Christ.

I think the reason I have been so uncomfortable with conversion is my tendency to define it only as a one-time experience of coming to Christ. For while I cannot remember a time when I did not love Jesus, I have still experienced a number of important conversions which have helped make me the Christian I am today. ■

Daniel Brunner

I grew up in the city of Nottingham, England in the 1940s and ‘50s. Despite its legendary associations with Robin Hood and Sherwood Forest the city today is part of a large industrial area which extends through most of the Midlands region. The major industries are mining, steel manufacturing and engineering. My home background was the inner city. My father was a garage mechanic and my mother a carpet seamstress. We were therefore a working class family belonging to the non-book culture.

Although my parents were not church-goers, my mother from my infancy encouraged ‘good night’ prayers and sent me to Sunday school. This ensured them a quiet afternoon to recoup their strength to face another arduous working week. After I graduated from Sunday school to the boy’s Bible class, I was challenged by the leader regarding my personal commitment to Christ. Although I must have heard the gospel on many previous occasions, it was only then that I realized the significance of who Christ was and what he had done on my behalf. I was then 16 years of age and about to step out into the workday world. My felt need was for someone alongside who would direct the course of my life and give it meaning. It was only after I submitted to his control and his Spirit began to throw some light on my life’s purpose, that I really became aware of my need of forgiveness and for my priorities in life to be rearranged.

Membership in the Anglican Church, work as a laboratory technician with a pharmaceutical company, and national service with five years training for the Anglican ministry introduced me to a wider world. I needed to continue my

education and wanted to grow as a Christian. But at the same time, something else significant was happening, of which I was unaware until much later. I was becoming culturally distanced from my home environment. In the family we understood one another less and less as we each occupied our different worlds.

Looking back I am now aware that conversion is a far more complex experience than I initially realized. First, conversion is not just crisis but process. Following the initial turn around when I turned from serving self to serving Christ, I discovered many other areas of my life which needed ‘converting.’ Feeling my human inadequacy in my endeavors to serve Christ as an associate minister in South London, as a missionary in South America, as a church growth “expert” among the struggling churches of Britain, and now as an assistant professor at Fuller Seminary, I have needed to consciously ‘convert’ from self-reliance to dependency on Christ. Second, that ‘conversion’ often comes with a cultural package. While I was solidly “working-class,” those who shared the gospel with me were middle-class professionals, spreading a different language and with different life-styles and expectations. At the time of my conversion I didn’t have the maturity to distinguish between Christian conversion and the cultural wrapping in which it was presented. As a sad consequence I became a stranger to my own environment. Thirty years later I’m still struggling to see my former world from an insider’s perspective. ■

Eddie Gibbs

CONVERSION: Our Calling to Reality

by Donald A. Hagner

Our English word “conversion” (from the Latin root, *conversio*) means simply a turning from something to something else. Given the clear importance of this idea throughout the Bible, it is surprising to see how limited the specific vocabulary for “conversion” (and the verb “convert”) is, and how relatively infrequently this vocabulary occurs in the NT.

Any examination of the biblical definition of conversion must begin with one of the most common Hebrew verbs in the OT, *shubh*, meaning to “turn” or “return.” In the majority of occurrences it is used quite literally, referring to physically turning or returning. Often, however, it is used metaphorically in the sense of turning or, rather, returning to God (repenting). The particular idea here is a return to the obedience that reflects loyalty to the covenant relationship already established between Yahweh and Israel. Only in a few exceptions does this use of *shubh* refer to non-Israelites or to a turning to God for the first time (e.g., Jon. 3:8, 10). The emphasis in the OT is repeatedly on Israel, who so often is found in need of returning from her wayward conduct back to faithfulness to the commandments (cf. 1 Kgs. 8:33, 48; Hos. 14:1f.; Jer. 3:12, 14, 22; Zech. 1:3f.). The prophets come to speak longingly of a final, eschatological “return” of Israel to God, and not simply a return from the Exile to the

land, when she will at last exhibit the righteousness to which she is called (for *shubh* in this connection, see Jer. 24:7; Lam. 5:21; Hos. 14:7; cf. Deut. 30:8). The frustration caused by Israel’s failure to return to covenant faithfulness prompted Jeremiah to speak of the necessity of something new, specifically a new covenant through which a lasting righteousness would be obtainable (Jer. 31:31-34; cf. Ezek. 18:31; 36:26f.).

The Septuagint translates *shubh* most often by *epistrephein* or *apostrephein* (each word gets about nine columns in the Hatch-Redpath concordance). In the OT references listed above, for example, the Septuagint has the former, except for the Jonah references, which are the latter. *Epistrephein* occurs only 36 times in the NT (half of the occurrences are in Luke-Acts); the cognate noun, *epistrophe*, is found only once (Acts 15:3, referring to the mission to the Gentiles, the only time the RSV uses the word “conversion”). As in the OT, the word can be used either literally or metaphorically. Only about half of the 36 occurrences refer to conversion. Ten of these are found in Luke-Acts, where they indicate a turning to God that is reminiscent of the metaphorical use of *shubh* in the OT. The word is applied to Israel in Luke 1:16, Acts 3:19, 9:35; and to Gentiles in Acts 11:21, 14:15, 15:19, 26:18, 20. Only two other references to the word with this meaning are found in the Gospels, both in citations of Isa. 6:10 (Mk. 4:12 and Mt. 13:15). The word elsewhere has this nuance of turning to God only twice in Paul’s writings (2 Cor. 3:16; 1 Thes. 1:9); twice in James (5:19f.); and once in

1 Peter (2:25). *Apostrephein*, on the other hand, connotes conversion only in Acts 3:26.

One other important NT word must be mentioned, namely *metanoia* (verb form, *metanoein*), “repentance.” Although the word occurs only seldom in the Septuagint (the noun once in the OT, four times in the Apocrypha; the verb 20 times in the OT [only once as the translation of *shubh*], 3 times in the Apocrypha), the noun is found 22 times in the NT, the verb 34 times. As is well known, *Metanoia* and *metanoein* refer to a “change in mind” — but one of a revolutionary character, involving a 180 degree turn in direction, from a former sinful course of life to a right relationship with God. In the Gospels when John the Baptist, Jesus, and the disciples use this verb, it is at first glance hardly distinguishable from the prophetic call to return to God (e.g., Mt. 3:2; 4:17; Mk. 1:15; 6:12; Lk. 15:7; Acts 2:38). But it must be remembered that from Jesus onwards, the word is conditioned by the proclamation of the present reality of the Kingdom of God. *Metanoein* occurs only once in the epistles (2 Cor. 12:21), but a surprising eight times in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, where it has a strongly Jewish sense of returning to an original loyalty, (in this case, however, to a renewed Christian faithfulness). *Metanoein* occurs together with *epistrephein* in Peter’s sermon to Jews (Acts 3:19) and in Paul’s defense before Agrippa, in reference to Gentiles (Acts 26:20).

CONVERSION: Essence of the Christian Story

by Ray S. Anderson

It is particularly revealing to note what it is that repentance leads to. The noun *metanoia* is most frequently connected with forgiveness of sins, in an appeal both to Jews (e.g., Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3; Acts 5:31) and to Gentiles (Lk. 24:47). It is "repentance unto life" that God has granted to the Gentiles, according to Acts 11:18. Repentance will lead to "a knowledge of the truth," according to 2 Tim. 2:25. *Epistrephein* involves a person turning to the Lord (Lk. 1:16; Acts 9:35; 11:21; 2 Cor. 3:16); or to God (Acts 14:15; 15:19; 26:20; 1 Thes. 1:9); to "the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:25); or, in a most striking reference, "from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:18).

We are now in a position to draw some conclusions from this cursory survey of the linguistic data: (1) The idea of conversion — i.e., a turning from sin to obedience to God — is fundamentally important in the biblical perspective, with the OT concept carrying over into the NT, although not without some mutation. (2) In the OT the turning (or "conversion") refers almost always to Israel returning to covenant faithfulness. (3) In the NT the turning applies both to Jews and Gentiles, but now in relation to the new reality of the gospel. Before this new reality Jews and Gentiles together stand in need of conversion. As in the OT, so too in the NT the grace of God precedes, and is the basis of the experience of conversion. (4) As it was for the Jews in the OT, so too Christians can find

themselves in need of additional repentance or turning, in this instance to a renewed faithfulness to Christ. (5) The idea of conversion is reflected in a special vocabulary in both Testaments, but by no means is the concept limited to these words. This is especially the case in the NT, where the new reality of fulfillment, which both Jews and Gentiles are called to enter, is spoken of using rich, new metaphors.

In the last analysis there are two striking things about conversion in the NT: the newness of the reality to which we are called and the extension of the invitation to the Gentiles. The new reality that lies before us in conversion is described in the NT through a variety of images: e.g., the Kingdom of God, salvation, eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, rebirth, redemption, reconciliation. What lies behind us in conversion is also clear, being described in such images as the

—TO BACK INSIDE COVER

DR. DONALD A. HAGNER, professor of New Testament, received his B.A. from Northwestern University, a B.D. and Th.M. from Fuller Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from the University of Manchester. An ordained minister in the United Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), he has taught at Wheaton College and Graduate School, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, as well as served as associate director and dean of the Summer School of the Institute for Youth Ministries at Fuller.



Without conversion, Christianity would have no story to tell. Indeed, many view the conversion of Saul of Tarsus as the most significant event in the history of Christianity with the exception of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus himself.

Conversion is first of all a story. Then it becomes a subject of theological reflection. Conversion is a historical account of an individual's relation to the Kingdom of God before it becomes a theme of theological discourse. Thus conversion is a public and social event before it can be considered as a private and psychological experience.

We are only interested in the nature of a conversion experience as a central theme in the theological curriculum because such experiences have produced the story upon which theologians ponder. It was the conversion of the early disciples of Jesus to the reality of his resurrection which produced the testimony to his being Lord and Savior. Pentecost could not have been a theological theme apart from the gathering of those who already had a story to tell of their own conversion.

The Apostle Paul grounded the authority of his gospel and the authenticity of his own apostolicity in the story of his conversion (cf. Gal. 1:11-17; Acts 9:1-30; 22:3-21; 26:4-23). Among the final words from the Apostle to his spiritual son, Timothy, are those which speak of his own pilgrimage of faith from his conversion and calling to his present day faithfulness (2 Tim. 1:8-12; 4:6-8).

Would we speculate as to the nature of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road if the subsequent

"Conversion is first of all a story. Then it becomes a subject of theological reflection."

life of this man had not produced a history of faithful and devoted service to Christ his Lord up to the very end? Hardly.

Why do we not speak of the conversion of Ananias and Sapphira, a couple who were presumably baptized members of the early church in Jerusalem? Is it not because their story is one of apostasy, having lied to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11)?

The five personal stories of conversion which comprise a focal point around which this discussion of conversion takes place, all have two things in common. There is a common perspective and a common assumption. The stories are all told from a present tense perspective. Regardless of the circumstances which are remembered as leading up to or producing an experience of belief and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior, the stories are a testimony to a presently experienced and committed relationship to Jesus Christ.

The stories also have the same assumption concerning the person of Jesus Christ as the definitive criterion for what constitutes Christian conversion. These two assumptions are the controlling ones for our theological reflection: that the experience of Christian conversion is defined by Jesus Christ as the controlling reality, and that the story of Christian conversion is a perspective from the present toward the past, or from the end toward the beginning.

The stories themselves offer a study in contrasts from most any other perspective. One views her conversion in the context of a dramatic intervention of God through a supernatural healing. Another laments the lack of any recognizable single experience or event which can be called conversion. One experiences

conversion in the context of a quite strong Christian environment and with strong community support. Another is converted in the context of a pervasive and persistent non-Christian context. One testifies to the influence of another person as the triggering event of conversion, while another read a scripture verse printed on a plastic sticker on the window of a car and was liberated from a demonic stranglehold of spiritism.

The origins of conversion will necessarily be ambiguous, especially from a cultural, sociological, psychological and anthropological perspective. From a theological perspective, these origins and influences can be viewed with relative indifference. This is not to say that certain factors in the context of conversion are not to be considered as more propitious than others. But from the perspective of conversion as a story, those factors which have to do with the motivations or manner of conversion are not the critical ones for theological reflection.

What is of decisive importance in assessing the nature of Christian conversion is that Jesus Christ be understood clearly as the sole criterion as to the content of conversion, and that the event of conversion be located in a story, or history of personal life and faith which is open to public examination.

An examination of the treatment of the theme of conversion in the standard systematic theology textbooks will reveal a preoccupation with the terminology of conversion and with the origin of conversion. The exegetical sections contained in these

theological treatises tend to begin with distinctions which can be made between *metamelomai* (repentance, remorse), *metanoia* (conversion, change of mind), *epistrephein* (conversion, to turn), and *palingenesia* (regeneration). From these exegetical distinctions, attempts are made to establish a logical priority of causality with regard to conversion as a human activity of repentance and turning toward God and regeneration as a divine enabling of that conversion through the imparting of a new nature. (For a discussion of these terms, see the selected bibliography at the end of this article).

If we are to make a distinction between regeneration and conversion, we can be helped by O. Weber who suggests that conversion is rooted in the salvation-event which occurred in the resurrection of Jesus and which is promised to all who share in that event through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Regeneration is thus an eschatological reality which is manifested through conversion in the "here and now" of our own life pilgrimage. Through the eschatological reality of the Spirit which comes to us and abides with us in the event of our conversion, we experience a fundamentally new direction in our life. (*Foundations of Dogmatics*, II, p. 356).

In one of the most recent systematic theology texts published, Millard Erickson (1985) argues that from a logical standpoint the Calvinist position which holds that conversion as a human action results from the divine initiative of regeneration makes good sense. Yet, he concludes, the biblical evidence supports the opposite position that conversion as a human

“What John offered was a conversion to the reality of God himself...resulting in fruit appropriate to such a new life...”

act of turning toward God is prior to regeneration (pp. 932-933).

The question of priority with regard to the action of God and the action of the human person in the experience of conversion becomes abstract and technical when investigated apart from the event of conversion itself. Such speculation is largely absent from the biblical stories of conversion. The Apostle Paul locates the effective agent of his own conversion in God, not in a sequence of actions within his own experience. The same God who revealed his Son to him, says Paul, “set me apart before I was born...” (Gal. 1:15). Paul’s conversion story does not lend itself to psychological analysis so as to determine the exact sequence or moment of divine influence upon his own motives and will.

From the perspective of a psychology of religion we are powerless to penetrate the inner core of conversion; we can only observe the external phenomenon. A conversion experience, whether sudden and dramatic, or extended and unspectacular, is part of the history of a person’s life and cannot be treated as a mere phenomenon in abstraction from that history.

The story of conversion is the story of the realization and actualization of the Kingdom of God in the life and destiny of human persons. In the preaching of the prophets in the Old Testament, the summons to conversion was central. The children of Israel had turned away from their orientation to God as the One who called them out of their history of

death, with its anonymity and despair, into a new history of pilgrimage and hope, with the very name of Yahweh as the content of their new identity. Conversion is offered to them as a gift of grace, along with warnings which attend the neglect of such a turning to God with the whole heart. (cf. Isa. 6; 15; 25; 45; Jer. 31; Ezek. 33; Psalm 90).

In the New Testament, the preaching of John the Baptizer continues this same theme of repentance and turning back to God as the Kingdom of God was even now in their midst (Matt. 3:1-12). The Pharisees, who resisted this message of John had, in fact, already effected a conversion of sorts through the scrupulous formation of a religious life which they were sure embodied the righteousness of God. One could even say that that Pharisaism was a “penitential movement,” albeit, a turning in the wrong direction, toward external and formal righteousness. This conversion of righteousness into religious formalism reduced the mystery of the Kingdom of God to manipulation and control. The movement even sought proselytes, according to Jesus’ own scathing denunciation (Matt. 23:15).

What John offered was a conversion to the reality of God himself which would affect the total person, resulting in fruit appropriate to such a new life and history with God (Matt. 3:8). This fruit cannot be manipulated or produced through self-induced techniques, but evidences the growth produced by the Kingdom of God itself (cf. Matt. 6:33, 7:16; Mark 4:26-29).

The story of Jesus can be understood also as a story of conversion. Receiving the baptism of John, Jesus places himself in the

position of one who is now being directed from above, not from below. He accepts the offer of conversion to God which was addressed to Israel, and on behalf of those who have turned away from God, he turns toward him, with obedience and steadfast love. Contrary to the ethos and destiny of the present age, including the false piety of the Pharisees, he cultivates a new ethos and a new community as a manifestation of the Kingdom of God. “Being found in human form,” Paul writes, “he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name...” (Phil. 2:8-10). The theological content of conversion rests upon this christological foundation.

We are therefore urged to have this “same mind” in us, as the form of our own conversion (Phil. 2:2,5). It is for this reason that the New Testament authors in general, seem to prefer the Greek word *metanoia* (another mind) over *epistrephein* (to turn away) to express the basic content of conversion. *Metanoia* stresses the radical new perspective of the inner self as expressed through the will, with subsequent actions, which characterize the mind of Christ.

Thus Paul speaks only infrequently of conversion, but repeatedly of faith as “being in Christ,” of “dying and rising with Christ,” as “putting on the new man,” and as being a “new creation.” The Johannine literature represents the new life in Christ as a “new birth,” as a passing from death to life, from darkness to light, as the

“The authentic story of conversion is not ‘how’ one came to be a Christian, but ‘where’ one is with Christ at the present time.”

victory of truth over falsehood, and of love over hate.

The true *metanoia*, or conversion of human persons to God has been initiated and completed in Christ. With his resurrection and exaltation, the story can be told. In Christ, God has turned toward the world, making no distinction between Jew and Gentile. But in the same event God has turned the world toward Himself through the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. The gift of the Holy Spirit awakens human persons to their own participation in this “gospel of conversion.” As a result, Karl Barth can say that God is both the converting God and also, representatively, converted man (Church Dogmatics, IV/2, p. 582f).

The preaching of the gospel to all the world is thus an extension of the offer of conversion as a subjective possibility based upon the objective reality of conversion which has its basis in Jesus Christ. To be converted is to leave the old history of death and despair and to enter into the new history of pilgrimage and hope along with the “children of God” (cf. Heb. 3:12-4:14; 12:1-2; 1 John 2:28-29).

From a theological perspective, conversion is an event which radically transforms the process of an individual’s life into a pilgrimage of purpose and hope as defined by participation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This event of conversion has a beginning which only becomes clear and unambiguous from the end.

The means by which conversion takes place are relative to the evidences by which conversion is recognized and affirmed by the *sanctorum communio*, or the communion of saints, the church as the assembly of those who give testimony to life and faith in Jesus

Christ. In other words, the method or manner by which individuals enter into that community of living faith in Christ is not definitive of conversion as a spiritual reality, but only descriptive of the process of conversion as a historical and psychological event. The story of conversion contains elements which are purely descriptive of the process, as well as the element of *testimonium spiritus sancti*, the testimony of the Holy Spirit. “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God...” (Rom. 18:15, 16).

From a theological perspective, there is no reason why conversion may not have its inception in a communal or group process, as well as in an individual act. As human persons, we experience our identity to some degree in common with others, and experience some of our most significant life-transforming events as part of a group. Because conversion to Jesus Christ results in a “story” which one tells or shares, each person is differentiated in the group by his or her own story of faith and life with Christ. The authentic story of conversion is not “how” one came to be a Christian, but “where” one is with Christ at the present time.

The story of conversion is not only a description of a past event or even process by which we came to share in the life of the Spirit, but it is a contemporary enactment in word and deed of our orientation to the goal which lies in Jesus Christ himself. Conversion, thus, is not a “boundary” over which we pass in order to be

described as Christians in terms of a prescribed manner of thinking, speaking or behavior. Rather, conversion is an orientation and movement from where we presently are toward the center, which is the goal determined by Jesus Christ himself. This distinction has been presented from the perspective of cultural anthropology by Professor Paul Hiebert, who likens the biblical event of conversion to the orientation of an “open set” as compared with a “closed set.” In the closed set, the boundary definition, which is largely descriptive and prescriptive, determines the moment of conversion. In the open set, conversion is not one’s proximity to the center in terms of descriptive behavior, but one’s orientation to the center as an attitude and intention of life and action (Hiebert, 1978).

Conversion is a process which has its beginning in a movement of response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The authenticity of conversion is not determined by the manner in which this beginning is experienced, but rather in the orientation and direction of a person’s life as evidenced by attitudes and actions which witness to Christ.

We can now see why our stories of conversion are descriptive of a variety of experiences, methods and circumstances, yet each one is essentially a story of participation in the life of Jesus Christ as the salvation event which comes to us in the power and presence of the Spirit-filled community. Every human person comes into this world in need of conversion. To every human person is offered the gift of conversion in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

CONVERSION: Shaping Our REALITY

by Charles Kraft

The task of a theological seminary is to prepare psychologists, missiologists, pastors and evangelists to become effective agents of conversion. Because the process of responding to the gospel of Christ involves social, cultural and psychological aspects of each person's life, conversion is effected through a variety of methods and skills. At the same time, all methods and means by which conversion is sought are radically qualified and held accountable to the character of conversion as evidenced by the life of Jesus Christ in community. For this reason, those equipped to carry out the ministry of conversion through the church must have theological competence, spiritual discernment, and a vital relationship to Jesus Christ—that is, a story to tell which is current and credible.

The story of mission and ministry is a conversion story, and without conversion stories, our ministry is in vain, as the apostle Paul himself knew. It was not his conversion story which

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It is increasingly in vogue for Christians to use terms such as "Christian worldview." Such a term is clearly intended to point up the contrasts between the perspectives of those who are Christian and those who are not, between those who have experienced Christian conversion and those who have not. There are, however, sizeable problems with the use of such a term. I will attempt to outline some of them and to propose what I believe to be a better way to refer to the differences.

The major problems with a term such as "Christian worldview" cluster in two areas. First "worldview" is a term used widely and defined carefully by anthropologists. This means we have a responsibility to use the term as nearly as possible in the way it is used within the discipline from which we have borrowed it. Secondly, there are quite a number of different perspectives within the Christian community, some of them competing. We cannot, therefore, avoid a great amount of confusion if we use a term like "worldview" in the singular. But can we be content to speak of "Christian worldviews?"

As a Christian anthropologist who has been teaching courses on both conversion and worldview for more than fifteen years, I would like to make a contribution both to greater clarity of understanding and to more effective expression of what we mean when we speak about the changes that Christian conversion entails.

"REALITY" Versus "reality"

In the background of our consideration is the apparent fact that we have to deal with two realities. The underlying "REALITY" (capital "R" reality) is that which is or that which happens as God alone sees it. The

second reality then is perceptual "reality" (small "r" reality). This is human perception or understanding of "REALITY".

"REALITY" is what actually is. However, "reality" is what humans understand that "REALITY" to be. Humans apparently never observe without interpreting. So when we understand and/or report, that which we have experienced or observed "REALITY" is both viewed and interpreted in terms of a perceptual grid constructed from a number of cultural and personal elements (discussed below.) The resulting understanding, then, is strongly affected by this grid.

Interpretive grids differ from person to person to such an extent that we can never expect identical understandings/descriptions of a given event from two persons. Judges and juries take this fact into account in court. If two witnesses describe a given event ("REALITY") identically, they will be accused of collaboration rather than regarded as credible. For this reason, the Scriptures are more, rather than less credible when they provide more than one perspective on the same events—as in the four Gospels.

Persons of the same cultural background will, however, interpret and describe events in much more similar ways than will persons of different cultural backgrounds. And those of the same subcultural background (e.g., same dialect, same social class, same geographical area, same age group) will perceive in even more similar ways than those of the same overall culture but from different subcultures.

I believe this discrepancy between "REALITY" and "reality" is what the

"...the Scriptures are more, rather than less credible when they provide more than one perspective on the same events—as in the four Gospels."

Apostle Paul was referring to in 1 Cor. 13:12 when he wrote: "At present we are men looking at puzzling reflections ("dim image" GNB) in a mirror. The time will come when I shall know it as fully as God has known me!" (Phillips).

Worldview: A Culture's Construction of Reality

Anthropologists have been studying worldview as a part of culture at least since the pioneering work of Redfield (1953). We see it as the deepest level of this very complex and pervasive thing called culture. The worldview of a people is, therefore, the primary grid through which that people understands and interprets the "REALITY" that they observe and experience.

A worldview consists, then, of 1) basic assumptions or presuppositions, 2) values and 3) allegiances. The assumptions taught to a child are not reasoned out, they are simply accepted. He/she may reason out some of them later in life. But a person will live his/her whole life without reasoning out or, often, even being aware of most of these basic assumptions. Within western cultures, for example, very few will either question or be able to explain why we do our math to the base ten, why we feel that land can be owned and sold, why we feel we have a right to fertilize soil, why we don't believe in spirits and/or ghosts, why we feel that burping in public is impolite, why we value youthfulness more highly than old age, etc., etc. We simply assume (if we reflect at all in this area) that life is supposed to be lived on the basis of such assumptions and that any competing assumptions are probably either wrong or inferior to ours.

On the basis of such underlying assumptions, then, people evaluate. Youthfulness is considered "good" by westerners and age considered troublesome and to be avoided because we are taught to assume that youthfulness is good and desirable. A person who talks and acts as if spirits exist is evaluated negatively because we have been taught to assume that spirits don't exist. Anyone who acts as if they do, then, is trespassing against a deep seated basic belief and is, therefore, considered "wierd" by those who are culturally orthodox. A person who burps in public (other than a child who hasn't learned this rule yet) is evaluated negatively as well. One who, on the basis of another worldview assumption, strives to gain material wealth, however, is evaluated positively unless he/she blatantly trespasses other assumptions concerning how people ought to be treated in one's quest for wealth.

What we value, then, we make a commitment to. Those things we value most highly we pledge stronger allegiance to. Those things we value less we develop a lesser commitment to. Americans tend to pledge high loyalty to such things as self-interest, job, country, family and the like. American Christians add God and church to that list. Much weaker allegiance is usually pledged to such things as the type of soap or toothpaste one prefers (values), the kind of car one owns, types of clothing, hairstyles, facial hair for men and the like. In given circumstances, however, any of these supposedly weaker allegiances can become very

strong due to the meanings that are attached (or, often, imagined to be attached) to such items. Witness, for example, the intensity of allegiance of certain groups to short hair or long hair, to clean shavenness or beard-ness, to one or another form of music.

The worldview of a people functions to provide them with 1) explanations of how and why things got to be the way they seem to be, 2) ways in which they can evaluate what life brings them, 3) appropriate psychological reinforcement, especially in times of crisis, 4) integration between the various ways of approaching life provided by their culture, 5) ways of prioritizing the various allegiances they may choose, and 6) guidelines concerning what to do (e.g. whether to change or not) when faced with experiences and/or concepts not previously a part of their worldview.

All worldviews appear to deal with at least the following aspects of human experience: 1) classification of all elements and aspects of human life (e.g. the grouping into culturally defined categories of plants, animals, people, experiences, ideas, etc., etc.), 2) person-group characteristics and relationships (e.g. "we-they" distinctions, group versus individualistic emphasis, appropriate role distinctions and the like), 3) time, 4) space, and 5) causality (e.g. what causes what and how).

Internally, a worldview may be understood to consist of thousands of complex constructs (perceptions) of portions of reality. These may be labeled "paradigms." A perception of a portion of reality such as that mentioned above (in the quote) concerning whether or not spirits are

"If there were a Christian worldview...conversion would require the total replacement of the cultural worldview by the Christian one."

the/a cause of disease would be a paradigm. Conversion to Christianity would ordinarily involve the changing of one or more paradigms within a person/group's worldview. A possible exception to this would occur in the life of a person brought up in a Christian home whose conversion might not change anything in his/her perspective (i.e. change no paradigm) but would simply involve a personal commitment to the Christ to whom he/she has all along understood that he/she would have to make a commitment.

Another term frequently used in discussions such as this is "model." A model may be seen as a less complex construct or "picture" of some portion of reality that forms a part of a paradigm. Jesus used many such constructs/pictures in his teachings. The portrayal of God as Father and himself as Son would be one such model. Others would be Christ as Good Shepherd, the Kingdom as a mustard seed, the disciples as fishers of men, Satan as a roaring lion, etc. Metaphors usually imply models.

Conversion as Change of Perspective and Allegiance

There are at least two major things that ordinarily take place to initiate a Christian conversion experience. The person 1) changes his/her perspective and 2) by an act of the will, pledges his/her allegiance to Christ. It is likely that these two steps may occur in either order or simultaneously. As mentioned above, it is not unlikely that a person who, probably because he/she was brought up that way, already accepts a Christian perspective/paradigm will only have to take the step numbered 2.

As can be seen from the above discussion, a worldview is a very complex thing. It is, furthermore, so basic to and intricately woven into the life of a people that no group or individual can, as far as we know, ever completely change from one worldview to another. If there were a Christian worldview, however, conversion would require the total replacement of the cultural worldview by the Christian one. But experience has shown that even a change as radical and all pervasive as Christian conversion seldom results in a person or group replacing such worldview perspectives as their classification system or their views of space or time unless (as has often been the case in "colonialist" missionary work, and was the case in the early church prior to Acts 15) the Christian witnesses require conversion to their alteration in most of their views of person/group or causality, though Christian conversion will affect these areas more than the others.

If there were a Christian worldview, furthermore, all Christians would be obliged to give up their different understandings of Christianity and to conform to the same basic assumptions, values and allegiances. This would require the kind of cultural conformity that the early church repudiated in Acts 10 and 15 and Paul eschewed in 1 Cor. 9:20, 21. It would require that peoples of various cultures give up their diverse understandings of "REALITY" even at the most trivial points in order to conform to that "super worldview" called Christian. Not only is this impossible, it is totally unnecessary.

What is ordinarily necessary (except as noted above), is what is called by philosophers of science a "paradigm shift" (Kuhn 1970). This involves a radically new understanding ("reality") of some significant portion of "REALITY." This is, I believe, what Paul refers to in 2 Cor. 5:16, 17 when he says, "No longer, then, do we judge anyone by human standards. Even if at one time we judged Christ according to human standards, we no longer do so. When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come." Note that the paradigm shift results in a person looking at a significant aspect of "REALITY" (Jesus and other humans) from a different point of view. The change is from seeing things from a human perspective to seeing (as best we can) from God's point of view. This, I believe, is the foundation of the new beingness spoken of in verse 17.

What results, then, is a change in (within) worldview, not a change (exchange) of worldview. The vast majority of the assumptions, values and allegiances of a person/group's worldview remain largely intact, at least at the start. We see, then, a wide range of perspectives on such aspects of "REALITY" as the doctrines taught in Scripture and the experiences God brings into our lives even on the parts of sincere, committed Christians. Labels such as Calvinist, Arminian, Covenant, Dispensationalist, Charismatic and the like then surface to designate such differences in the ("reality") understandings of "REALITY" in terms of which Christians operate. There is, apparently, a range of such understandings allowed by God even though at the commitment level he tolerates no alternative to total commitment to himself. Any other primary commitment is idolatry.

"...it is the personal activity based on a change of perspective that results in salvation."

Though certain of the available alternate perceptions of Christian doctrine (e.g. certain Mormon and Unification Church understandings) seem to fall clearly outside of those allowed by the Bible and are, therefore, to be labeled "heresy," we cannot always be certain which are which, since as humans we all measure the interpretations of others (their "reality") from the perspective of our own understandings, of Scripture, our "reality." And all of the human "reality" paradigms we work with are strongly affected both by human cultural and experiential limitations, and by sin.

Another implication of this perspective "reality" is that African Christians and Asian Christians and Latin American Christians will always be identifiable as Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans in comparison with North American Christians because their worldviews are so dissimilar to ours. We and they will, however, share some very similar views with regard to the Christian faith that we each hold. Certain paradigms within their worldviews will bear striking similarities to certain paradigms within ours since they and we are both committed to being guided by the same guidebook—the "REALITY" of the Bible. Their understandings of that guidebook will, however, not necessarily correspond with ours in every detail, since they, like we, look at that part of "REALITY" as at all other parts from the perspective provided by our respective worldviews. Their perspective on how God sees things, for example, may diverge from our perspective on the same issue.

A change of perspective, in and of itself, however, never saves anyone. The paradigm shift can convince one that he/she needs to change certain assumptions, values and allegiances. But it is the personal activity based on such a change of perspective that results in salvation. One must actually change one's allegiance (not simply, as a result of the paradigm shift, believe that he/she must change it). This activity is personal, not simply cultural. It involves behavior. And behavior, though patterned and structured by deep level culture (worldview) and surface level culture (customs), is personal.

This allegiance is, furthermore, a continuing thing. This means that it will exert a continuing influence on the various paradigms within a person/group's worldview. This process, not unlike the process involved in normal personal maturation, involves the continual reevaluation of existing paradigms in the light of continuing experience. When old paradigms are found to no longer explain and otherwise support new experiences, new shifts of perspective take place. Many of these are very exciting parts of Christian experience as the convert comes to understand (paradigm shift) and experience (behavior) such things as the acceptance, forgiveness and mercy of God and other Christians, worship and fellowship, the leading of others into such paradigm shifts (conversion experiences), and similar concomitants of the Christian life.

On occasion, in the process of growing in the Christian experience,

one may undergo the most radical kind of paradigm shift—the kind that goes completely counter to one's previous construct of "reality." Turning to Christ from a culturally approved life of financial and/or social success and security may be such a radical shift for some, as may be a turning from a life centered on drug addiction. The tremendous life-changing experiencing of God's acceptance (often in contrast to a perceived rejection by one's closest human acquaintances) may have a similar impact. One of the most radical paradigm shifts for many Christians is one that happens if they begin to see and experience God's miraculous interventions in direct response to their or other's prayers. This shift is especially radical for westerners due to the absence in our "naturalistic" worldview of categories within which to interpret such events, much less to accept them and to incorporate the possibility of their happening into our

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CONVERSION: The Sociodynamics of Change

by Henry Newton Malony, Jr.

As of this date (February, 1986) legal action involving conversion is taking place in California. Larry Wallersheim is suing the Church of Scientology for breach of promise and for making him mentally ill. Mr. Wallersheim became a member of Scientology while on a visit to San Francisco from the midwest when he was 18 years old. He remained a member of this church for the next 11 years until he was 29 years of age. During that time he availed himself of the church's training services and became part of the church's staff. Some time after leaving the church he became aware of what he felt was the ineffectiveness of Scientology's ministry to him. They had promised that his personality would improve and his intelligence would increase. In fact the reverse had occurred. He saw himself as mentally handicapped by his years in the church and he decided to seek redress for his treatment by taking legal action against Scientology. He is suing the church for 18 million dollars.

Expert witnesses for the plaintiff are asserting that Mr. Wallersheim was: (1) an innocent, normal mid-western college lad in San Francisco on a mid-term break; (2) physiologically and temperamentally hypersuggestible; (3) preyed upon by a seductive temptress; (4) falsely convinced by sales techniques of his need for what Scientology had to offer; (5) subtly coerced into joining the church; (6) influenced by brainwashing to stay in the church; (7) threatened with emotional and physical harm when he considered leaving; (8) continually promised beneficial change if he stayed with the

group; and (9) made mentally ill by his 11 year experience in the church.

Because of the bad press which Scientology has received in the past decade many would be inclined to suspicion that all of the above accusations were, indeed, true. However, it should be noted that social psychological processes are social psychological processes wherever they are found and that upon closer examination most of the procedures referred to in these accusations have their parallels in well accepted evangelistic endeavors. They are similar to conversion experiences in a variety of settings. The case of The Church of Scientology is used here as a situation from which most readers can gain some distance and, therefore, it is a case which will allow us to examine more closely many of the psychodynamics involved in conversion wherever it occurs.

The Psychophysiology of Conversion

One of the accusations made by expert witnesses in the Scientology case is that Larry Wallersheim was a physiologically hypersuggestible young man whose temperament made him unduly susceptible to being influenced by the sales pitch of the church. Little matter that this assertion is based on an assessment of Wallersheim 15 years after-the-fact via the "eye roll test" which is widely discredited by professionals. The claim is made that at the time Larry did not have the psychological independence which one needs to make informed decisions. The inference is made that the church should assess this psychophysiological state in their prospective members and should not attempt to influence persons, like Larry, who may be

inclined temperamentally to accept the message of the church too easily.

This is not a new claim with regard to religious experience. William Sargant¹ claimed some time ago that religious experience resulted in "reciprocal inhibition" of certain parts of the brain through "hyperexcitation" of other parts. Since religious experience tends to give one the feeling that all problems have been solved and that all the world looks new, Sargant felt this pervasive, different outlook had to be based on denial or repression. The ability to cut off from awareness certain parts of awareness, as one does when problems vanish in light of religious experience, Sargant felt was an ability which varied from person to person. Those who were hypersuggestible, whose brain receptors were physiologically weaker, who were "hysteric," were more inclined to have religious experiences.

Sargant's hypothesis has been widely accepted and tested. Kildahl,² for example, concluded, among a sample of Lutherans, that those who became glossolalic (i.e., spoke in tongues) were more inclined to score higher on the Hysteria scale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. However, no other research has been able to replicate these findings (cf Malony and Lovekin³) and the possibility of finding more hysterics in churches than in the general population is extremely unlikely.

The contention that religious groups, such as Scientology or Christian churches, should be held responsible for assessing potential

"Persons are in need or they would pay no attention to the sales talk of the evangelist..."

converts on their level of hyper-suggestibility is very problematical. Would the expert witnesses who make this claim be willing to generalize this responsibility to used car companies, department stores, resort developments, newspapers, etc.? I suspect the issues lie much deeper for these expert witnesses.

They speak of religion as "totalistic" in the sense that it provides answers to ALL of life. Gordon⁴ agrees with this impression in his definition of conversion as "the process by which a person comes to adopt an all pervading world view." There is a general discomfort among western social/behavioral scientists with institutions marketing a product which promises such a possibility. As Thomas Szasz has noted, the social behavioral sciences are entrenched servants of their culture and their tendency to counsel for "adjustment to society" is no accident. When one of the expert witnesses in the Scientology case reports that the former members of religious groups "take two years to readjust to society" she is making an implicit value judgment of approval for a society which esteems hyperindividualism and rationality about group commitment and overarching answers to life's problems.

I suspect that these scholars are uncomfortable with religion in general and that, had they the courage, they would challenge any and all conversions, be they to The Church of Scientology or to The United Presbyterian Church. Their singling out one group to accuse may be more a situational artifact than a matter of discrimination.

Suffice it to say, that neither the accusation of physiological hyper-suggestibility among converts nor the

claim that religious groups should screen out such persons are tenable propositions. Nevertheless, it should be said that a certain amount of susceptibility to social influence is necessary for any conversion to occur. Even such a private conversion as that of Donald Tweedie (reported in Malony⁵) was not complete until he sought out a church which offered him an invitation to become a Christian, which he accepted!

The Intrapersonal Dynamics of Conversion

The next claim that has been made about Larry Wallersheim is that he was an innocent, normal, 18 year old, mid-western college lad on a spring break trip to San Francisco who was overwhelmed by the calculated seduction of a religious group. In my opinion, such a claim is patently untrue in this case and in almost all other cases where religious conversion occurs.

Persons are in need or they would pay no attention to the sales talk of the evangelist—whether that evangelist be a representative of the Roman Catholic, the Southern Baptist, the Unification, the local independent Bible church, or Scientology.

Larry Wallersheim was no exception to this rule of thumb. Prior to that fateful trip to San Francisco, his social history reveals that he was a lad who had died his hair purple while in high school, had left his Roman Catholic background and joined an eastern religion, had walked nude around the office of his draft board to convince

them of his instability, and had made failing grades in two colleges. Clearly this was a young man who was seeking answers to some major life issues.

The intrapersonal dynamics of converts require such a state if conversion is to occur. Jesus' statement about it being easier for a camel to crawl through the very low entrance to a sheep fold than for a rich man to get into heaven (cf. Matthew 23:24) is a testimony to this requirement. Jesus was saying that the rich tend to meet their life needs with money and, therefore, are cushioned against the disappointments and enigmas which provoke the need for religious answers. Of course, it is possible for camels to crawl into sheep folds and it is possible for the rich to be converted, but those with less wealth are more likely to listen when religion speaks.

The Lofland and Stark⁶ "problem solving" model for conversion is a clear statement of these intrapersonal dynamics. They call them "predisposing conditions." They suggest that the first condition is a state of tension, strain, frustration or deprivation. This state, according to Lofland and Stark, has usually led to a problem solving perspective which provoke pre-converts to explore various solutions to the frustration they are experiencing. This results, in the third place, in a general mode of "seeker-ship" which makes them oriented to answers. In other words, it makes them alert to those events in their environment which promise resolution of their tension. These intrapersonal dynamics make them susceptible to the "situational contingencies" in their environment. Thus, the fourth stage

“...ours is an ‘age of conversions’ in which many, if not most people could be best described as suffering from a hunger for meaning.”

is a turning point, defined as an event that places them in situation where conversion can occur. For Wallersheim this was his trip to San Francisco—an unfamiliar environment to which he went willingly even though unknowingly. This is similar to persons who go to church without clearly knowing why they are there.

The expert witnesses in the Scientology case present a “passive” model of the human being. They contend that humans are unsuspecting “sitting ducks” waiting to be shot by unscrupulous evangelists who use brainwashing and thought control methods to overwhelm people.

This is questionable, at least in western culture. As sociologist James Richardson suggests, ours is an “age of conversions” in which many, if not most people could be best described as suffering from a hunger for meaning. Thus, people are continually seeking. They are not passively content and adjusted, as the expert witnesses would have us believe. In the words of theologian Paul Tillich, “Life poses the questions to which faith is the answer.” And LIFE is that which is lived by ALL persons—not just a few. Richardson⁷ suggests we study conversion “careers” rather than conversion “events.”

Life long “careers” include a number of jobs. Conversion careers might include a variety of commitments to different religious groups. From this point of view, “alternation” might be a better term than “conversion.” Many persons alternate between one group and another. They only settle down in one group after periods of soul-searching and identity seeking. It is still valid to think of these matters along a continuum in which “alternation” would refer to those transitions which were PREscribed or permitted within a

person’s former system of meaning (for example, a Methodist becoming an Episcopalian) and “conversion” would refer to those transitions to identities which were PROscribed or forbidden (for example an Episcopalian becoming a Hari Krishna). But in BOTH cases the person would best be thought of as an active seeker rather than a passive recipient. In fact, there is some warrant for hypothesizing that where the transition is more radical, as in Wallersheim’s conversion from Roman Catholicism to Scientology, the decision will be MORE volitional and deliberate than in situations where the change is less so, as in a transfer of membership from the Presbyterian to the Baptist church.

The Socio-Dynamics of Conversion

While the expert witnesses in the Scientology case are in error in their view of the human being as passive, they are correct that the church promised radical transformation of Wallersheim’s character. This is the model which religions always follow. For example, the Christian faith diagnoses the human condition as one of desperate sinfulness in need of a powerful savior. This judgment leads to the conviction in potential converts that they cannot save themselves. At this point the evangelist offers hope and redemption if they will accept the grace, or forgiveness, of God by faith in Jesus Christ. The promise is made that accepting God’s grace through faith will result in the solving of all of life’s basic problems.

The diagnosis of Wallersheim’s condition and the recommended solution through accepting

Scientology’s service follows a similar pattern. Their belief that persons are contaminated by “thetans” which prevent them from using their full capacities is answered by offering potential converts the experience of “auditing”—a counseling-like procedure designed to “clear” persons of these contaminations and, thus, release their full capacities (personal, intellectual, and spiritual) for happy living. Although one may disagree with the content of such models as Scientology’s, it is obvious that the format is very similar from religion to religion.

Therefore, the expert witnesses are correct in saying that Scientology made radical promises to Wallersheim—all religions do. They were also correct in saying that these ideas were mediated through persons who actively represented the church. Lofland and Stark⁸ termed these processes the “situational contingencies” of conversion. These situational contingencies involve 4 steps: (1) encounter with a religious group; (2) formation of affective, emotional attachments to those in the group; (3) reduction of contact with former associations; and, (4) intensive interaction within the group. Lofland and Stark contended this was the normal process wherever conversion occurred.

However, the expert witnesses call this seduction, not normal social influence. In fact, Neil Duddy⁹ construed it as the “seduction syndrome” and contended that it characterized deviant religious groups such as The Unification Church, Scientology, and The Local Church but not mainline churches. In support of this position, Richard Ofshe¹⁰, a sociologist who is one of the expert

“It may be that only when individuals affirm the ideology of a group and become a part of it can conversion be said to have occurred.”

witnesses in the Wallersheim case, contends that there is a clear difference between “systematic” and “mundane” social influence. He asserts that systematic influence highly organizes the environment around the potential convert, exposes the individual to frequent and pervasive stimuli, and rewards the person with powerful rewards and punishments for acceptable performance. Mundane social influence, on the other hand, has fewer of these characteristics.

While, at first glance, these characteristics sound as if they would support the contention that certain groups use deviant techniques while others do not, the expert witnesses have been unable to distinguish the methods used by such groups as Scientology from the highly sophisticated techniques of evangelism taught in major seminaries around the nation, much less the differences between negative systematic social influence and normal child rearing, newspaper advertisements, used car sales, training in the armed services, and graduate education.

One wonders whether the issue is so much one of a distinction between methods that are good or bad as a reluctance on the part of some group to put out the effort it takes to win converts. There are proven methods of social influence and groups should not be criticized for using them. I suspect that most mainline churches who disapprove of such groups as the Moonies would have as much success were they willing to spend the time and energy the Moonies spent on design and execution of their method. That these groups follow proven methods—of this there can be no

doubt. The experience of Larry Wallersheim follows Lofland and Stark’s steps to the letter.

However, this does not mean that they are using “brain washing” or “thought coercion” techniques. Those expert witnesses who have claimed this relationship ignore one crucial difference between conversion in a free society and influence procedures used on captured prisoners. Converts to religious groups in our country are not physically imprisoned. This is an essential difference that obliterates for all time any comparison between the two. There is absolutely no way to claim that social influence without incarceration can be said to resemble change which occurs behind bars, in spite of what some expert witnesses may contend. The closest one could come to such a comparison would be those cases such as Constantine and the Roman Empire where a whole nation was declared Christian by fiat and where an ideology was forced on people who feared for their lives if they did not comply. The type of individual conversion that occurs in western society is of a different genre.

I suspect that most of the criticism leveled at such groups as the Moonies, Hare Krishna, and Scientology is due to disagreement with their ideology rather than with their methods. Of course, such ideological disagreement is appropriate, but if we contend that the Christian faith is superior to all others, as I personally contend, such a contention deserves better than to be hidden underneath a false criticism of method. Once again, I further suspect that much of the expert witness testimony criticizing these groups is based more on a disapproval of ANY religion than on any clear cut empirical distinction between good and bad methods of social influence.

In sum, all conversion has its sociodynamics. In fact, one could say that while the predisposing states of tension and solution seeking are the necessary conditions, the situational contingencies are sufficient conditions for conversion. It may be that only when individuals affirm the ideology of a group and become a part of it can conversion be said to have occurred. This hypothesis has two implications: first, it implies that human beings may be so constructed that decisions made individually will not last, and, second, it implies that the confirmation and support of others may be necessary for conversion to be effective. Whereas inner decision may be a first step (psychological conversion), it must be followed by attachment to a social group (structural conversion) for real life change to occur.

Summary

This article has discussed the psychodynamics of conversion. Using the current case of Wallersheim versus The Church of Scientology as an example, the physiological, the intrapersonal, and the social dynamics

—TO BACK INSIDE COVER

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CONVERSION: Expectations and Responsibilities

by William E. Pannell

The Judeo-Christian tradition is essentially ethical in its demands. It is the expression of the requirements of a holy God who not only calls people to belong to him, but to be like him. Fellowship with fidelity to such a God requires obedience toward God, holiness of life and justice in human relationships. It is for this reason that conversion is an ever-present demand. For the human race, however else it may be understood, is not by nature or intention a holy race. It does not incline to God in its affections. Unaided by the Holy Spirit, the human spirit can no more bring forth life than could that darkness in the "unbegun beginning" bring forth light without the Word of God.

Conversion is a profoundly ethical event. The details issuing from that event will work themselves out differently in each person, but any conversion true to the Gospel should lead one to accept certain ethical values not necessarily supplied by one culture or any other source. These values are uniquely associated with the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures, and God's Kingdom purposes. And this: conversion never takes place in an ethical vacuum. Which is why the apostles are rarely heard urging people to simply "try Jesus."

The issue claims more careful attention today because there is a discernible diminution of ethical sensitivity among so-called converts at the very time that all sorts of evangelistic and church growth programs are being launched. We no sooner get someone married to Jesus than they get divorced from a spouse.

George Gallup Jr., addressing the Academy of Evangelism recently, expressed great sadness that the findings of their polls reveals that

there is little difference between the church and the unchurched when it comes to ethical behavior. One need only check student and faculty behavior at major seminaries to gain some insight on the charge that Christians are often theological absolutists and moral and ethical relativists.

But these views are scarcely startling, and certainly not peculiar to this poor preacher. Tucked into this bias that conversion affects ethical behavior, which is shared by most evangelicals I suppose, is the hub of an on-going debate, especially among evangelicals. At issue are definitions of evangelism. As Leslie Newbiggin put it, "How are we to evaluate a form of evangelism which produces baptized, communicant, Bible reading, and zealous Christians who are committed to church growth but uncommitted to radical obedience to the plain teachings of the Bible on the issues of human dignity and social justice?"¹ Or put it this way: should evangelism and social responsibility be kept separate as they are in the Lausanne Covenant or should the Committee convene a select group to work on merging paragraphs four and five of the Covenant into the same paragraph?²

Another point of debate is how much ethical content one should include in the Gospel message. How much "converting" should be expected of a convert? Maybe we should just get the person "saved," and leave the question of ethics to some later "discipling" program.

If being saved has limited ethical content, what then does it mean to be saved? Does "getting saved" have no ethical meaning? My impression is that

most evangelicals would say that conversion—getting saved—does change one's life, and does effect one's ethical behavior, but that this is merely a private matter like, for example, stopping biting your nails, drinking Scotch, smoking pot, or messing with your neighbor's spouse. So far so good. But if you keep going, it becomes clear that these changes are not merely personal or private. They are also profoundly social. The reason is simple: the human race is a social network. We live in societies. God has made us social beings: to be is to belong to someone. Furthermore, sin is not a private matter alone. It is also social and relational. Salvation then, in order to undo the deep ravages of sin, must also be at once deeply personal and interior, but also social and relational.

But experience in evangelism does not allow simplistic predictions about how specifically a new convert will behave. Neither does biblical research. Ethical perceptions and actions are often like tiny time capsules exploding in the consciousness of the newly converted. The reason for this is that in biblical evangelism the message dictates the ethical response, not the preacher. The evangelist must not pre-load the message with ethical "norms" supplied by his or her culture or denominational tradition as pre-conditions for salvation. To do so would create moralisms and legalisms not supported by Scripture or sanctioned by the Holy Spirit. For this reason the Jerusalem leaders refrained from imposing any complicated ethical system on Gentile converts at Antioch. They knew that these believers had already been saved by grace, just as they (the Jews) had been. In evangelism the issue, the good news, is

"Salvation...must be at once deeply personal and interior, but also social and relational."

salvation by grace through faith. It has nothing to do with cigars, cigarettes and tipparillos.

But if the preacher must avoid pre-loading the Gospel with his ethics, allowing the message to dictate ethical values, how account for the lack of ethical sensitivity among modern-day converts? Is it because the evangelists of our time have indeed pre-loaded the Gospel with an ethic which is in fact a non-ethic? Modern evangelism operates out of a hermeneutic shaped by a North American preoccupation with individualism, with the self and its passion for fulfillment. The culture is therapeutic in its orientation. In this context ethics becomes relativized, measured by whatever feels good, or by the individual's perception of whether a given value serves her best interests. Robert Bellah and Associates discovered this phenomenon in their research on how America's middle class makes sense out of their lives. Mindful of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Bellah and friends concluded that "the central problem of our book concerns the American individualism that Tocqueville described...It seems to us that it is individualism, and not equality, as Toqueville thought, that has marched inexorably through our history. We are concerned that this individualism may have grown cancerous...that it may be threatening the survival of freedom itself."³ And at the core of America's individualism is the inability to identify any values beyond the self by which ethics can be defined or behavior judged. Thus concepts like freedom or justice (as these ideas were conceived of by the Puritan and founding fathers at least),

to say nothing of happiness, become problematic, and what is of even greater concern is the possibility that a sense of community or the basis of a shared cultural meaning will be totally lost.

The simple response to this cultural individualism is to argue that it is further evidence that the society has surrendered to secular humanism; that the country has become a "cut-flower" culture, severed from its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Abraham Joshua Heschel, in *The Abiding Significance of Religion*, once argued that the problems of America were essentially religious and that the reason the Bible, with its sublime answers, did not speak to today's situations was because Americans no longer raised the questions for which the Bible provides the answers. Heschel saw society asking the question, "What does man require of God?" whereas the Bible speaks to the question, "What does God require of man?" Evangelical preachers would agree with this analysis, but tend to answer the biblical question with an unbiblical gospel. The answer would be informed and shaped by the very culture that is sick unto death, and that answer would be that "salvation" is an individual matter, that to "try Jesus" brings one personal happiness, a sense of well-being, a meaningful life and, according to some purveyors of prosperity, a pot of gold at the end of the service. By such preaching the messenger has pre-loaded the gospel just as surely as his counterpart we previously described.

This is culture Christianity. Try Jesus and you will drive a Mercedes! It is a religious experience mirrored in the waters of narcissism.

Ethics get short-circuited in much evangelism today because the enterprise is not so much dictated by

careful biblical exegesis as by certain ideological assumptions within Western culture. Operating out of a hermeneutic of suspicion, many non-Westerners see the divorce of social ethics from evangelism as a product of a bourgeois evangelicalism out of touch with its history and its basic documents. It would be an evangelism taken captive by its culture which means that it would be, in its institutional expressions and in its prevailing assumptions, largely racist. Not a blatant, red-neck-Klan racism. That is long out of style, even for the revived Klan. Bigotry no longer wears bed sheets. It comes now in three pieces from the designer collection at Penney's

The racism I mean is the unconscious acceptance of the ideology of white supremacy, what Gary Wills meant when he said that "Americans don't like to think of their country as white, but they are careful to keep it that way." In America, when that ideology is unconsciously accepted, the institutions of the majority culture will always be paternalistic in their relations with its minority brothers and sisters. For this reason power and control become central ethical concerns.

The questions of ideologies is crucial in evangelism and there is a growing consensus at home and abroad that evangelicalism has sold itself to ideologies supportive of racism and materialism. One critic of the church growth movement—and there are several—has argued that this influential school had largely lost its prophetic and countercultural dimensions due to its captivity to American cultural values; that the very process of distinguishing

“We are impotent in the face of human suffering...where the pursuit of individual meaning is more valued than justice.”

between “modalities and sodalities,” “evangelism and social responsibility” was itself a reflection of this deep-seated state of disobedience to the total demands of the gospel.⁴

Tough charge, and in the decade since his comment, amid debates in and out of print, the issue remains unresolved. I know few Afro-American evangelicals aware of the issues who would seriously disagree. They knew something was up as early (or late) as the 50's and 60's when from the back-end of their moving vans white evangelicals assured us that God loved us and had wonderful plans for the old neighborhood!

It is this captivating ideology of white supremacy that accounts for the bad breath of America's “culture Christianity.” It is the chief reason why two-thirds world believers (and their colleagues from the first world who occupy a similar station) usually have a conference within a conference when first world leaders convene a major evangelistic gathering. We have learned that the platform will rarely address our issues. Persons representing our issues will rarely hold center stage. Thus at Lausanne and Pattya, and again at the so-called ethnic congress in Houston in 1985, important minority caucuses had to be held to address glaring omissions in the establishment's program. The issues that emerge from the two-thirds world are those dictated by living conditions at the margins of society. These are ethical issues — poverty, hunger, homelessness, the usurpation of urban land by corporations and governments. As Carl Braaten has put it, “the church in mission confronts two major crises

that threaten the life and well-being of millions, even billions, of people today. The first is the existential crisis of meaning, and the second is the global “crisis of misery.”⁵ Most of the movers and shakers in the evangelistic enterprise, the people who concoct the definitions affecting mission and missions, have their roots in Western culture with its passion for meaning. The non-Western world, the prime targets of our evangelistic and missiological passion, struggle against the sweeping tide of misery that made the question of meaning almost irrelevant.

Braaten is correct in his assertion that “the challenge that faces a hermeneutic of mission is to show that the God of the Bible, the Father of Jesus the Messiah, discloses the totality of meaning in God's self-revelation adequate to each individual's quest for the meaning of life.”⁶ This clearly is the evangelistic mandate and the church, especially the evangelical wing, has acquitted itself fairly well in this arena.

But the church, especially its evangelical segment, has not done well in its approach to the “wretched of the earth.” Not always through lack of interest or failure to try. There is a demonstrable effort to move beyond mere words in our approach to human misery. It's called holistic ministry. But we are still largely hamstrung in our efforts toward “wholiness.” This is especially true when the context of misery is the city.

It is my contention that we are hung-up because we can't get the relationship between conversion and ethics straight. We have an inadequate theology of evangelism on the one hand and are impotent in the face of human suffering on the other because we refuse to challenge the fundamental assumptions of a culture where

the pursuit of individual meaning is more valued than justice. At stake is more than the millions Braaten mentions. At stake is the integrity and future usefulness of the first world church.

What is needed is what Michael Harrington calls an “epistemological proposition,” “that truths about society can be discovered only if one takes sides.”⁷ For most of us in rather cozy settings this would mean switching sides for we have already taken sides.

It was this very problem my colleague and I faced in a crusade in Newark in the late 60's. Part of the town had been torched and the smell of burning hung in the air and in the streets. The people who invited Tom Skinner and myself to conduct a crusade for the city operated on the premise that if black people had been saved they would not have burned their part of the city. We argued that if white people had been saved they would have made it unnecessary to burn the city. Sin in that city and in Watts, Detroit, and, for that matter, Pasadena, was more than personal and private. It was also corporate and institutional. But the only theology we could work with required us to insist that the people sinned against repent and convert. When we changed our preaching to include those who institutionalized and politicized their sins against others, we were accused of abandoning the simple gospel for politics.

That experience was pivotal for us. By the time we preached in Chicago we had begun to work on an understanding of good news from below. We had begun to ask what the

“The church has lost its doctrine of sin, or at least misplaced, it, or perhaps it was sold to the social scientists.”

sermon would sound like if we took sides with the politically disenfranchised in a town run by the Boss. We began to ask different questions of the Scriptures and the impact on preaching was considered. Zondervan published those sermons and captioned them *Words of Revolution*.

What does this have to do with conversion. This: our understanding of mission is determined, if we are not discerning by our social and cultural hermeneutic. This is why North American evangelicals insist on the use of the term “priority” when discussing the church's mission. Evangelism is the church's “top priority.” Sure, we can afford it. With a little left over for our favorite shrink. This is usually accompanied, as it is in Braaten's mind,⁸ with the fear that if the church takes its social responsibility too seriously, it risks losing its evangelistic passions. Billy Graham's inaugural address at the Lausanne Congress expressed the hope that those assembled could get straight the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility. “Let us rejoice,” he said, “in social action, and yet insist that it alone is not evangelism and cannot be substituted for evangelism.” The Covenant produced by that assembly came out about where it went in. Evangelism is in paragraph 4, social responsibility in paragraph 5. And as could be expected, it is in the paragraph on social responsibility that we are warned against identifying ethical issues, i.e. reconciliation with man, political liberation and social action, with evangelism. In paragraph 6, “The Church and Evangelism,” the Covenant states flatly that evangelism is “primary.” All Christian activity is equal, but some more equal than others.

The Lausanne Covenant is only the latest product in a long historical process, that has gradually denuded evangelism of its social ethic.⁹ That process is inadequately informed by biblical theology. It is informed by the values of Western American culture. And my point is that this accounts for the way in which evangelism and social ethics have been kept apart. American society is not concerned about ethics or morality. It is concerned about meaning and has been for many years. This is why our most effective cultural evangelist is Robert Schuller. His advice recently to the United Methodist Church in the summer of 1985 was to forget social ethics. People didn't want to hear that. He is right. But then first century Palestinians didn't anticipate, the message of John the Baptist either. And he told them to repent, share their goods, stop their brutality or go to hell.

But if ideologies of race and individualism cloud the ethical demands of conversion, there is yet another factor of greater import. The church has lost its doctrine of sin, or at least misplaced it, or perhaps it was sold to the social scientists. Nearly thirty years ago Meg Roff, syndicated columnist, charged that the watershed of the 20th century was the abolition of sin. Sin today, she claimed, was sibling rivalries, oedipus or anti-oedipus complexes, thumb-sucking, too early or too late toilet training, or the loss of a little red sled. Psychology had become the new religion of middle class America, and the church gladly

and uncritically accepted its nostrums. The churches became centers of “healing” and preachers turned in their prophetic robes for counseling garb.

But the fog is clearing. The “sick” didn't get “well” and those churches who abandoned the biblical perspective on the human condition are generally high and dry. Hobart Mowrer, an early critic of the church for its capitulation to Freudianism, argued that “neither cheap grace (in religion) and the strategy of denying the reality of sin and guilt altogether (in psychoanalysis), has worked.” And his conclusion? “...that ‘therapy’ or ‘salvation’ is possible only at great cost: the cost of self-revelation, deep contrition, and a radically charged way of life.”¹⁰

The Christian view of sin tends to get relativized when subjected to the rigors of sociology and anthropology also. And by the time a good environmental psychologist finishes the lecture, you want to burn the slums yourself.

The lost sense of sin is accompanied by a loss of the holiness of God. For a pastor/evangelist to argue against evangelistic preaching because people “already know they are sinners. They need the good news of acceptance and the possibility of self-fulfillment,” is to indulge in wishful thinking. What Americans know about themselves is very little. What they know about sinfulness, except that they enjoy its practice, is less than that. The reasons for this are many, but come finally to rest in our unwillingness to confront the holiness of God as it is revealed at the cross. It's as difficult to preach the cross today, even among Christians, as it was in Athens during Paul's brief visit. And for the same reason — we have become so sophisticated culturally, philosophically, and theologically.

“Conversion...has two primary dimensions. It is a turning from one's present state, and a turning to God.”

Our condition in the churches and in the society is Corinthian.

But after all the experiments with Humpty-Dumpty, the best diagnosis is the ancient one. The human race is sinful. As Bernard Ramm puts it, “While not denying that Christians can learn from other sources, [the Christian doctrine of sin] is the most comprehensive and satisfying explanation of personal and social ills.”¹²

The issue is complicated. Most matters dealing with human beings are. Elusive. Shadowy. Puzzling. Conversion is complicated. It is both a starting point and a culmination. The apostle Paul delighted in telling of his conversion. He was there when it happened. He could take you to the place. He could recount the exchange between his Lord and himself in vivid detail. It was a momentous event, changing his life forever. But to the Galatians he says that the event was part of a process begun from his birth (Galatians 1:15, 16). It was part of God's sanctifying work and a sublime act of grace.

Conversion is basically a turning. It has two primary dimensions. It is a turning from one's present state, and a turning to God. A classic biblical statement that incorporates both of these dimensions is Paul's joyous remark to the church at Thessalonica. He recalls how when they heard the Gospel they turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God (I Thessalonians 1:9). ■

END NOTES

- ¹Leslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 150.
²The International Congress on World Evangelization meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland (1974) issued an affirmation of faith. Signed by most of the delegates, it has come to be known as The Lausanne Covenant. It is composed of

fifteen topic-headings and features a statement on The Nature of Evangelism (Paragraph 4) and Christian Social Responsibility (Paragraph 5).

³Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), Preface, p. VIII.

⁴In a penetrating chapter in his *Contemporary Missiology*, (Eerdmans, 1978, Chapter XIV) Johannes Verkuyl presents a sobering analysis of the influence of ideologies among emerging Third World societies, and in Western Nations as well. See especially the section on “Evaluating the Ideologies,” pp. 393-402.

⁵Carl E. Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), p. 7.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷Michael Harrington, *Taking Sides* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1985), p. 1.

⁸Tom Skinner, *Words of Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970).

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“...western worldviews lead many evangelicals to allow for miracles in the past but to deny them in the present.”

Shaping Our Reality

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perceptual world. This deficiency in western worldviews leads many evangelicals to allow for miracles in the past but to deny them in the present.

Conclusion

In relation to worldview, Christian conversion is here seen as a change within but not of worldview. Though the peoples of the world differ considerably from each other at the worldview level, there is no distinctively “Christian” variety of worldview to which all Christians must subscribe. There are, however, sub-worldview constructs of “reality” called paradigms, that ordinarily need to be changed at about the same time as the person by an act of will commits him/herself to Christ. But there is even a considerable range of diversity in the paradigms held by equally sincere, dedicated Christians. Apparently, not even Christians have 20/20 vision with respect to our perspectives on biblical “REALITY” any more than we do with respect to other areas of “REALITY.” Though this is true, however, we can understand biblical “REALITY” clearly enough to make the saving commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Though this is based on and supported by a paradigm shift, it is a personal decision rather than simply a change in worldview (i.e. culture).

Continuing personal decisions to follow Jesus' way as best we can understand it from the scriptures and other Christian influences result in further paradigm shifting during the Christian's growth toward maturity. Many of these shifts are small and relatively unspectacular. Some, however, may be quite dramatic. ■

Essence of the Christian Story

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accredited his ministry, but the story of others: “...You shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain” (Phil. 2:15-16). ■

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Our Calling to Reality

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dominion of darkness, being dead in trespasses and sins, and (for Gentiles) “being strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 5:12). This great transference from darkness to light (Eph. 5:8) is summed up above all in baptism, with its rich symbolism

of a new beginning, and the associated concept of putting off the old and putting on the new. Perhaps Paul's wonderful statement in 2 Cor. 5:17 best catches the excitement of what conversion, according to the NT, involves: “If any one is in Christ, that person is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” All who have experienced conversion know and thrill to the reality of this statement, even though the full realization of this newness necessarily remains an eschatological expectation. ■

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of conversion were considered. A number of issues about which expert witness testimony in this case falsely presented the evidence were considered. While the article was meant in no wise to affirm the validity of Scientology beliefs, it was felt that the case revealed the tendency for those who disagree with the beliefs of a given religion to mistakenly criticize its methods when, in fact, they utilized the same approaches. It is hoped that the ideas presented here will help in better understanding the ways human beings function and the nature of the conversion process wherever and whenever it occurs. For a fuller discussion of these issues the reader might like to consult Johnson and Malony's¹¹ book-length volume entitled *Christian Conversion: Biblical and Psychological Perspectives*. ■

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