The Evangelical Understanding of Conversion

Gordon T. Smith in his essay on evangelical conversion in the *Oxford Handbook on Evangelical Theology* (2010) speaks of a “sea change” taking place in the evangelical world.[[1]](#footnote-1) Such a major shift in evangelical thinking makes it almost impossible to speak of *the* evangelical understanding of conversion but of the older and the newer views of conversion among evangelicals, although between them there is still some overlap. This is how I will approach my subject.

But before I do that, I think I need to distinguish between two current uses of the term. There is both a broad sense and a narrow sense, or more precisely, a theological sense and a historical sense of the term evangelical. To make matters less complicated I will not consider its continental usage where “evangelical” is virtually synonymous with “Protestant.”

Evangelical in the broad sense or theological sense

In the broad sense, all Christians are evangelical by definition because the gospel of Jesus Christ (the evangel) is at the center of their faith. I think all Christians will agree that without the good news of Jesus Christ, there is no Christianity. E.g. the Lutheran Carl Braaten understands that to be evangelical means to be true to the teachings of the apostles concerning Jesus Christ and to maintain a confessional standard that is universally binding.[[2]](#footnote-2) By “teachings of the apostles” Braaten is not referring to a narrowly-defined biblicism but to the gospel of Jesus Christ as it stands in *historical* continuity with apostolic teachings. Braaten describes his position as “evangelical catholic” (p. 6).

A recent book by the Catholic George Weigel titled *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st Century Church[[3]](#footnote-3)* shows that there is much about being evangelical in the way Braaten describes it that is shared by the serious Catholics as well. Weigel argues, among other things, for the need for Catholics to maintain personal relationship with Jesus: “You are a Catholic because you have met the Lord Jesus and entered into a mature friendship with him” (p. 34).

All Christians, whether they call themselves Catholics, Orthodox, Evangelicals, etc., if they take seriously the need for a personal encounter with Jesus Christ could be called an evangelical. That personal encounter may result in what some might call a paradigm shift, a radical reorientation of life and perspective, or the reintegration of the self—in short, a conversion. But *how* that personal encounter occurs is differently conceived in the different Christian traditions.

Evangelical in the narrow sense

Evangelicalism in the narrow or historical sense—the kind we see in the studies of George Marsden and David Bebbington, for example—is a product of revivalism which traces its roots to the 18th century revivals under the Wesleys, the spiritual “great awakenings” associated to Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, and later, the 19th century revival movements such as the Plymouth Brethren, the Holiness Associations and the Keswick Convention. The late 19th century Holiness and Keswick movements in turn contributed to the rise of Pentecostalism in the early 20th century. In short, evangelicalism in its late 19th and early 20th century expression was largely a reactionary movement to the “dead” liberalism of mainline Protestantism. It drew its inspiration from revivalists like Charles Finney and D. L. Moody. These evangelists have bequeathed to the evangelical movement a technique of revivalism which over the years has been refined and adapted to suit a rapidly changing culture. It is this kind of evangelicalism that I believe most of the people and organizations associated with Lausanne or the World Evangelical Alliance are related to in one way or another. My focus is on conversion as understood in this form of evangelicalism.

Conversion in popular evangelical parlance

Sometimes the best way to understand a movement is to examine the way key terms and phrases are used at the popular level. They capture the movement’s lived theology. One common phrase that evangelicals use to describe their conversion experience is “accepting Christ as personal savior” resulting in being “born again.” It means that a person needs to have “personal knowledge,” not just “head knowledge” of Jesus Christ, to become a Christian. Even if one is born into a Christian family, one still needs to make a “personal decision” to receive Jesus Christ. This explains why most evangelicals practice believer’s baptism. For many evangelicals conversion is a datable event, the day when he or she prayed the “sinner’s prayer” and asked “Jesus to come into my heart.” The goal of conversion is eternal life with God, or in evangelical parlance “going to heaven.”

Prior to this conversion event, there is usually come kind of crisis, however mild, which creates a restlessness, a sense that something is missing in one’s life, which causes the person to start searching for the truth. For many evangelicals, the result of conversion is peace and joy—essentially a reorientation of life and reintegration of personality. Such an experience is sometimes described as a “crisis conversion.”

If we try to unravel theologically these popular evangelical descriptions of conversion, I think a number of important features can be highlighted.

First, evangelical conversion is about a real, definite, if not definitive, encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. The experience is quite unmistakable and palpable. It is a life transforming event. The quintessentially evangelical question “are you saved?” presupposes such an understanding of conversion. In other words, if one is truly saved, one just *knows* it and should be able to testify to how and when it happened.

Second, evangelicals are quite certain that this experience is not merely psychological (although it may have psychological and even physiological ramifications), but is essentially a “spiritual” reality. They believe that conversion is new life given by the Spirit of God. A real, spiritual transformation takes place at conversion.

Third, evangelicals believe that this conversion experience is only the beginning of the Christian life. The “born again” Christian needs to grow in Christlikeness. The process of growth can be realized through various personal spiritual disciplines, especially personal daily prayer and Bible reading or the “Quiet Time,” fellowship with other Christians, and faithful service in the church and in sharing the gospel with others.

Fourth, conversion should lead to mission. It is not difficult to see why this is so for evangelicals. The convert is a witness to the truth concerning Jesus Christ in his/her own life. “Witnessing” is the most natural thing a witness does. Furthermore, the confidence of evangelicals in the power of the gospel to change lives and give eternal hope to a lost world compels them to be engaged in mission throughout the world. Mission is primarily about preaching the gospel of salvation and spiritual transformation. This does not exclude social services as a means to preparing people for the gospel. Sometimes evangelicals go to great lengths to preach the gospel even at great risk to themselves, such as undertaking missions to closed countries. The compulsion to evangelize accounts for its global reach.

More recent evangelical developments

In more recent years evangelicals are coming to see that their concept of conversion as a crisis event centering on the individual’s personal relationship with God needs to be re-visioned.

Without going into the many factors giving rise to evangelical rethinking on conversion, I would like to just mention two. The first is an evolving historical consciousness among evangelicals, seen in their appropriation of patristic and Reformation sources. These sources have given evangelicals a greater awareness of the deeper evangelical roots its shares with older traditions.

The second is the new Global South phenomenon. Western missionaries working in the Global South contexts have come to realize that many of their previous concepts of conversion do not fit readily the new mission situations. Sometimes whole tribes turn to Christ; sometimes conversion is more gradual that immediate. A personal decision to accept Christ in the individualistic West may not have the same meaning in a context where life revolves around family and tribe and where decisions are arrived at communally or based on the decision of the family head or tribal leader. Western missionaries are coming to realize that conversion is a lot more complex in these contexts, especially in Asia and Africa than in the West. The works of anthropologists such as Paul Hiebert have opened the eyes of many Western evangelicals to these other forms of conversion.

As is to be expected in a movement that has no central magisterium or even an acknowledged spiritual leader who is “first among equals,” there are many differing views among the newer evangelicals—too many to be considered in this short paper. What I will do is highlight some of the major shifts in evangelical thinking on conversion.

First, against the concept of crisis conversion or conversion as a punctiliar event, the newer evangelicals are realizing that conversion could occur as a continuing event. This has been observed, as already noted, in mission situations in the Majority World. In tribal societies it is not uncommon to find group conversions. In India and Japan, there are many who profess faith in Christ but do not participate in the institutional life of the church. In China, there are “cultural Christians” who do not profess faith in Jesus Christ, yet cultivate a worldview and life-style that is sometimes more Christian than professing Christians. What are we to make of all these phenomena? Hiebert has suggested that perhaps we need to see conversion as an on-going process in which a person moves from the periphery of the faith to its center. We cannot pinpoint when a person is converted.

Next, against the view that conversion is essentially the individual’s transformation and changed relationship to the person of Jesus Christ, newer evangelicals are coming to see conversion in relation to the mission of the Trinity, and coupled with this, the need to understand conversion in the context of the church. The language of relationality and communion is increasingly used among evangelicals these days. The church is not an ancillary to conversion or a practical arrangement for the more vital work of saving souls; rather, the church is the very locus in which conversion takes place. Salvation is not so much about my being born again to a new life and individual relationship with Jesus Christ as being made new by being incorporated into the Body of Christ by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). In short, conversion is ecclesially mediated.

Older evangelicals used to think that personal faith is about the only thing that really mattered; baptism is only an outward sign of an inward reality. The “ordinances” of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are observed only because they are commanded by Christ—hence “ordinances” rather than sacraments. But newer evangelicals are seeing that faith and baptism are inseparable: “Believe and be baptized” (Acts 2: 38) are two acts that belong together. Many newer evangelicals would agree with Calvin and other magisterial Reformers that true faith is “sealed” by baptism.

It is hardly surprising, in light of these shifts in thinking, that newer evangelicals are also coming to see the importance of sacraments. This comes about partly from their retrieval of patristic sources and through their re-connection to Reformation roots. Practically all the magisterial Reformers have an objective understanding of the church marked by word and sacrament. For Calvin, the church exists where the word is purely preached and the sacraments rightly administered. Luther even speaks of seven “marks of the church,” namely, the word of God, baptism, Holy Communion, the keys (i.e. church discipline), church offices (such as bishops and pastors), worship, and cross-bearing. He calls these seven marks “holy possessions” or “sacraments” used by the Holy Spirit to sanctify the church.

Evangelical sacramentology

As is to be expected of a movement with different historical roots, evangelical sacramentology takes on many different forms. Perhaps the better known ones are advocates of “emerging churches.” These are unabashedly postmodernists trying to deconstruct the “solid church” of modernity, and in so doing they make free use of pre-modern resources such as icons, sacraments, signs and rituals to create a “liquid church.” Some modern Wesleyans are reappropriating from the Wesleys the idea of the Eucharist as a “converting ordinance.” Some evangelical Presbyterians are reconceiving the covenant as the all-embracing category for understanding God’s relationship with his creatures. The phrase they use to identify themselves is “federal vision.” The objectivity of the covenant implies that the church is a spiritual, visible and objective reality. The covenantal signs too are objective and effectual. When one is baptized one is effectually in Christ. This is the basis for the assurance of salvation. One does not have to look inward for “signs” of saving grace, as was the case among 17th century Puritans. Then, there are Baptist sacramentalists. (No, that is not an oxymoron.) Some Baptists in recent years have become less reticent to speak of “sacraments” through discovering their sacramental roots in their earlier confessions of faith such as the London Confession (1677), which was an adaptation of the Westminster Confession. One of the more surprising developments is the “convergence churches.” They are mostly Pentecostal and evangelical-charismatic churches which are rediscovering the stability of the ancient way. Inspired by the works of Lesslie Newbigin and Robert Webber, their “communions” are episcopally-structured. They seek to incorporate the evangelical, charismatic and sacramental-liturgical dimensions into their worship.

Global South evangelicals and Pentecostals

Western Evangelicals are also increasingly exposed to a wide range of evangelical and Pentecostal bodies in the Global South and this is making them aware that there is more to the sacraments than just the memorialist view of Zwingli. Global South Christianity develops in a largely primal religious context; and the primal worldview, as anthropologist Harold Turner has noted, is deeply sacramental. Seeing a Pentecostal “bishop” sprinkling holy water on his congregation sets evangelicals a-thinking about their own lack of ritual expressions.

Conversion and spirituality

There is also a growing awareness that evangelical conversion needs to be followed up with a life of continuing growth into Christlikeness. It is not that older evangelicals have no concept of spiritual growth after conversion, but over time what they understand as discipleship comes to be equated more and more with activism. Richard Lovelace calls the problem the “sanctification gap.” Evangelicals themselves have seen the disastrous consequence of jumping from conversion to activism without passing through the process of sanctification. Basically, what evangelicals lacked is what in older traditions is called, spiritual or mystical theology, which sees conversion as initiation into a whole way of life with a clear direction and a goal. Thus there is a growing interest in spiritual theology. But over the last thirty years, this evangelical deficiency has been met by a proliferation of books, journals, and organizations dealing with the spiritual life.

Evangelical conversion and mission

If there is one thing that binds evangelicals past and present together, it is their concern that the life-transforming gospel must be proclaimed throughout the world. But mission is perceived in different ways.

Older evangelicals and social concern

Older evangelicals, with their individualistic understanding of conversion, tend to understand mission in terms of “saving souls” and preparing them for heaven. This does not mean that they are not concerned about social issues. There are many examples of genuine social concern, such as the orphanage of the famous Bristol Brethren, George Müller. Early Brethren were known to eschew class distinction by eating with their servants—something quite unheard of in class-conscious Victorian society. Many were philanthropists. It may be truer to say that their overriding concern for the spiritual welfare of others entails a different approach to social concern. Again, one could argue that such an approach sees social concern instrumentally rather than a good in itself. Yet, their strong belief that a person can be changed empowers individuals to become agents of change which indirectly leads to social change. Social studies in recent years of Latin American evangelical-Pentecostals have shown that conversion often led to changes in family relations and proves to be a strong catalyst for upward social mobility (Elizabeth Brusco, Bernice Martin). Similarly, in India, it is evangelical preaching on conversion that gives people a sense of personal agency which enables them to break free from generations of mental bondage to the caste system (Mangalwadi).

Newer evangelicals and social concern

What makes the newer evangelicals different is that they have developed a *theology* of critical social engagement, as seen in the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne in 1974 which produced the landmark “Lausanne Covenant.” Here, the gospel is recognized as having wider social and political implications than just the conversion of souls. Conversion should result in radical discipleship involving serious commitment to Christ to the point of resisting the pressures of this world and its false value-systems. In recent years, advocates of “missional ecclesiology” have given further theological underpinning for evangelical social action and concern by seeing the church’s mission as an extension of the Trinitarian mission.

I end with two summary observations.

1. Both older and newer evangelicals share a common belief in the power of divine grace to bring new life to all who are “dead in trespasses and sins.” But whereas older evangelicals tend to speak of conversion in individualistic terms, newer evangelicals tend to see the Christian life in corporate terms and the church playing a more critical role in personal transformation and long-term spiritual formation. The Christian life is not just about my own personal relationship with God. As the early Anabaptists used to say, “You cannot come to God except together with your brothers and sisters.”
2. The evangelical doctrine of conversion presupposes a strong belief in the person as a spiritual-ontological reality. While some have moved towards a more ecclesially-mediated concept of conversion, most evangelicals have not developed a doctrine of the church as a spiritual-ontological reality. With some exceptions, the church is understood largely in sociological-functional terms.

Conclusion

Evangelicalism as a loosely-knit movement made up of mostly Free Church denominations, independent churches and para-church organizations is still very much in flux. Whether these changes represent a genuine development of the evangelical doctrine of conversion or a doctrinal aberration is still a contested issue among evangelicals. But hopefully as it engages the older traditions, it might find some of its views confirmed, others discredited and still others contributing in some significant way to the Great Tradition.

1. “Conversion and Redemption,” in *Oxford Handbook on Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald McDermott (New York: Oxford, 2010), p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Mother Church*, pp. 32-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (NY: Basic Books, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)