
Conflicting Understandings of Christian Conversion: A Missiological Challenge

Richard V. Peace

We are seeing today a lively interest in Christian conversion, which perhaps reflects the fascination North American culture has had with spirituality since the 1990s.¹ That interest arose, not coincidentally, just as the baby-boomer generation started passing through midlife, a time of increased interest in the meaning of life. This interest in spirituality and conversion has continued unabated into the new millennium, fueled by the needs and interests of both Generation X and the millennial generation.

In the New Testament the word *epistrophē* (conversion) means turning around—that is, reversing direction and going the opposite way. One turns from the way of sin to the way of Jesus. The other key New Testament term, *metanoia* (repentance), also conveys the idea of turning, but it focuses on the inner, cognitive decision to make a break with the past. *Metanoia* must be combined with *pistis* (faith) in order to bring about *epistrophē* (as in the summary in Mark 1:15 of Jesus' message). So when Paul describes to King Agrippa what he preached to Jew and Gentile, he says it is "that they should repent and turn to God and do deeds consistent with repentance" (Acts 26:20). Christian conversion is characterized by a decision (repentance) based on understanding (awareness, consciousness, conviction) to turn around from a life of sin (darkness, disobedience, waywardness) to the way of Jesus (light, God, holiness), with a resultant new way of living in the context of the kingdom of God. In theological terms, conversion is the human experience of salvation (vs. the inner reality of regeneration, which is the hidden work of God).²

The most famous example of conversion in the New Testament is Paul's turning on the Damascus road. This experience is so central to the New Testament (where it is related three times in the Book of Acts and referred to by Paul in four major texts) and to the church (from it the mission to the Gentiles emerged, which ultimately led to the Western church and much of the missionary movement) that it has become for many people the paradigm of true conversion.³

Once we move beyond this biblical definition into the world of the church, however, we encounter different understandings of what constitutes genuine Christian conversion. Disputes among the various branches of the Christian family have erupted as one view of conversion has been used to argue against the legitimacy of all competing views. One's view of conversion is significant, however, for it shapes and determines one's view of evangelism. This matter therefore has deep missiological significance.

In this article I consider the way conversion is understood in five major Christian traditions: evangelical, Pentecostal, mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox. For purposes of this exploration, I use the typology for conversion suggested by Scot McKnight, who speaks of "three basic orientations to conversion: socialization, liturgical acts, and personal decision." He notes that "each is aligned with a major component of the church, and each appears to be allergic to the others. Evangelicals worry

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about Roman Catholic conversions; Roman Catholics are uneasy with evangelical conversion; mainline denominations are uncomfortable with both; on the rebound, evangelicals and Roman Catholics lift their eyebrows at mainline Christianity. . . . These groups squabble and feud with one another, usually politely but sometimes polemically."⁴ We consider these orientations in reverse order.

Conversion Through Personal Decision

Evangelicals. I begin with evangelicals because conversion has been central in this tradition, both in its self-identity and in its practice of ministry. I include in this group both fundamentalists and charismatics, since they share with evangelicals a common understanding of conversion, though with differences in practice and in certain theological positions.

Within the evangelical world, conversion is a defining emphasis. One cannot be considered a Christian unless one has been converted—and the more like Paul's Damascus road experience, the better. This kind of conversion is a sudden, punctiliar event, triggered by an encounter of some sort (with truth, with Jesus, with conviction of sin, with the plan of salvation, etc.) that marks the beginning point of the Christian life.

The strength of this perspective is its simplicity and functionality. Salvation becomes a matter of believing certain doctrines, trusting Jesus for forgiveness, and praying a prayer of commitment. Conversion is an individual experience that can be dated exactly. This view of conversion also provides laypeople with a concrete way by which to be witnesses for Jesus. They simply need to memorize a "plan of salvation" and share it with others.⁵ It is all quite well organized, simple, specific, and understandable.

Understanding conversion to be a matter of a personal decision effected by simple belief and prayer has resulted in countless men and women who have started to follow Jesus. The growth of many national churches around the world can be traced back to this perspective on conversion. It has generated the many evangelistic ministries with which we are familiar: mass evangelism, door-to-door visitation, tract distribution in public places, and many others.⁶

Unfortunately, a large percentage of these conversions are later abandoned. For example, Donald Miller noted in connection with the Harvest Crusades of evangelist Greg Laurie: "Greg Laurie's staff estimates that 16,000 conversions occurred at Harvest Christian Fellowship in the five-year period from 1986 to 1991. . . . Perhaps only 10 percent of these decisions resulted in long-term changes in personal behavior."⁷ This is a stunning statistic but not much different from what one hears informally from other evangelical evangelists. Such "erosion" raises the question of the validity of this personalistic definition of conversion. Can genuine Christian conversion regularly occur via a presentation of the "facts of gospel" that are believed and affirmed by a "sinner's prayer"? Evangelical missions must wrestle with this question.

My own sense, based on years of experience in evangelical evangelism both in North America and abroad, is that while

conversion can indeed take place in such circumstances, it is by no means as automatic or certain as evangelicals teach or imply.⁸ Biblically, the real challenge for the church is to make disciples (i.e., those who are actively and consciously following the way of Jesus), not to make converts (those who take a tentative first step toward Jesus). For evangelical missions, evangelism and spiritual formation need to be relinked. Much can be learned from both liturgical and socialization traditions of conversion that can aid in this process of making disciples by connecting them to communities and to worship rather than leaving converts to find their own way in the Christian life.

There are additional weaknesses in the decisionist tradition. In many cases this "technology of conversion" leaves potential converts frustrated, bewildered, and angry. "I tried it, but it didn't work. Christianity is not for me." Could it be that our evangelistic efforts result too often in immunizing people against Christianity, with only minimal positive results? Is evangelism really meant to be a matter of percentages: the more people contacted, the more converted, without regard to the vast number of people alienated by this process?

Another weakness is that such a perspective often fails to recognize that genuine conversion takes place in a variety of ways. For example, research indicates that no more than 30 percent of all conversions are punctiliar in nature. Most conversions take place over time, often with many fits and starts as one moves toward Jesus and his way. For most people, conversion is a process, not an event.⁹ Paul's conversion is not the only paradigm for conversion in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Mark we have the story of the unfolding conversion process of the Twelve, which gives us another way of thinking about conversion and doing evangelism.

Pentecostals. The Pentecostal view of conversion is similar to a traditional evangelical view, namely, that conversion takes place when an individual turns from sin to Jesus via repentance and faith and so receives Jesus as Lord and Savior. In many places, however, the Pentecostal view leads to a greater fervor in seeking to lead others to conversion. Evangelicals may have the same beliefs about conversion, but often it does not lead to an impassioned outreach ministry, whereas Pentecostal groups (especially in the Two-Thirds World) tend to practice continuous outreach involving every member. This evangelistic fervor comes from an eschatological urgency that insists that time is short—the Lord may return, or you may die—so decide for Jesus today!

Furthermore, Pentecostal conversions are typically more intense than those experienced by evangelicals. Evangelical conversion can be solely cerebral, merely a matter of believing a few things and praying a simple prayer. Pentecostal conversion, in contrast, is often accompanied by signs of power that convince converts that God is immediately active and present in their lives. Especially in the Two-Thirds World, so-called power evangelism is a potent force for conversion.¹⁰

Conversion Through Socialization

Mainline Protestants. McKnight asserts, "For many Christians conversion is a process of socialization."¹¹ From this perspective, Christianity is a matter more of nurture than of decision; the key decision is made on behalf of individuals as parents bring their infant children for baptism. The decision later required of these baptized children when they become adults has more to do with continuing alignment with the community than with following Jesus. The key activities of postbaptism nurture in mainline

churches are Sunday school instruction (for children), catechism and confirmation (for teens), and active participation in church leadership (for adults). In a mainline Protestant context people may be uncomfortable speaking about "becoming a Christian." It is more natural to talk about "being a Christian."

In his helpful article "The Mainline Protestant Understanding of Conversion," Donald McKim lists eight theological images of conversion.¹² One image is that of *transition*, as in the theology of Horace Bushnell: if children are nurtured in the Christian faith, they will never know themselves as anything other than Christians. Today's mainline church no longer holds a single view of conversion, nor is the operative view of conversion based on Reformation theology. Rather, it emerges from whatever central image captivates a particular congregation or denomination. Those who are guided by the image of liberation theology, for example, would understand conversion differently from those whose focus is feminist theology.

In point of fact, I find that mainline churches generally display a curious reluctance to talk about conversion at all.¹³ It is almost as if members believed that the word itself has been co-opted by other theological traditions and thus is not to be used because it connotes something with which we are uncomfortable. "Conversion" may be viewed as a power word, with those who use it seeking domination over others, defining for others what their experience must be. In addition, in mainline churches there is a kind of delicacy to inquiring about conversion, almost as if to raise the question is to suggest that some might be converted and others not.

In such a context it is easy enough to allow conversion and the work of conversion (i.e., evangelism) to drift from the center of one's ecclesiastical vision, as I think it has for many mainline churches. Significant amounts of money, though, have been spent in recent years in mainline denominations to promote the work of evangelism. For example, an independent fund within the United Methodist Church pays for professors of evangelism in Methodist seminaries. Mainline denominations have offices of evangelism that produce literature and seminars. Resolutions about evangelism are passed in Synod meetings. Unfortunately, though, nothing much gets done, largely because of a reluctance

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to put conversion into the center of our theological horizon.

There is a difference among church members, with some seeming to have a vital faith, and others what must be described as a nominal faith. Gordon Allport noted this difference in his seminal work on racial prejudice, in which he distinguished between those whose faith is intrinsic and those whose faith is extrinsic.¹⁴ For the former, faith is alive, real, and personal; for the latter, it is more a matter of form, duty, tradition, and obligation. The challenge for the mainline church is to help members move from extrinsic faith (nominalism) to intrinsic faith (inner conviction). This change is a kind of conversion in itself.

Mainline churches need to help their membership commit themselves consciously to what is implicit in church activity and membership. Without such consciousness, church membership

becomes like club membership: you hang out with nice people, but when you go home, such membership makes little difference in your life and the lives of others. We need to create ways for people to grow in all aspects of faith: belief, commitment, service, relationships, justice, spirituality, and more.

Nominalism is the danger in the new paradigm in North American evangelism expressed by the dictum “belonging before believing.”¹⁵ This evangelistic strategy—invite people into the community first, and in that context tell them about Jesus—is commendable. I believe it rescues evangelism from the highly individualistic tone it has often assumed in North America, for it

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puts belief in Jesus in the context of the community of Jesus. It rescues conversion from being a kind of legalistic insurance policy that guarantees heaven and allows it, instead, to become incorporation into the kingdom of God in the here and now. The danger of this perspective, however, is that it calls people to community without sufficient focus on what it means to be a child of God whose primary allegiance is to Jesus. Faith in Jesus needs to be internalized in order to be real.

Conversion Through Liturgical Acts

McKnight refers to mainline Christians as “socialized converts,” and he imagines them asking “liturgical converts” why so much attention is given to baptism, the Eucharist, and “official rites of passage.”¹⁶ And indeed also for “personal-decision converts,” the focus on sacraments is difficult to understand. How can one be converted without experiencing conversion or community, these other Christians ask?

Roman Catholics. Catholic reflection on conversion is caught between the experience of Augustine and the fact of infant baptism. Is conversion an experience, or is it a grace mediated by the church? For Augustine, conversion came in a moment when he heard a voice telling him to pick up the New Testament and read. As he did, “there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.”¹⁷

There is an interesting body of literature dealing with conversion in the Roman Catholic Church, shaped in particular by the writings of Bernard Lonergan.¹⁸ Contemporary Catholic writing insists that “conversion cannot be isolated and reduced to a self-conscious moment.”¹⁹ Yet it is aware of the problem when the subjective (experiential) element of conversion is removed or muted. Karl Rahner is “concerned that the administration of the sacraments in the average parish often ‘masked’ the experience of conversion behind baptism, confirmation, and first communion.”²⁰ Rahner goes on to encourage Catholics to give up their suspicion of “the conversion phenomenon” and embrace the whole idea of conscious conversion.

When conversion is the outcome of a ritual that is entered into for a variety of reasons—custom, expectation, family, convenience, social status, as well as genuine faith—it can result in nominal faith.²¹ “I am a Catholic because I was born a Catholic and baptized a Catholic.” Even though the ritual itself is filled

with meaning and power, that meaning and power can be sapped (in the here and now at least) by the motives and responses of those participating in the ritual. In the same way that “praying the sinner’s prayer” (in the evangelical context) or “joining the church” (in the mainline context) can be mechanical and devoid of real content and meaning, so too can one’s baptism be empty in liturgical churches. In each instance the challenge is to help the convert move from the event or the experience into a genuine discipleship.

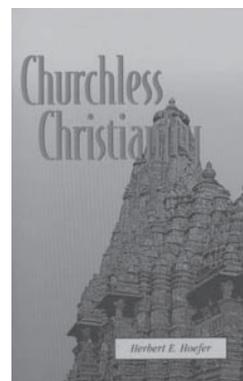
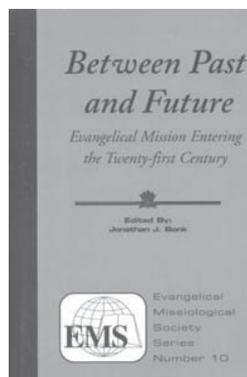
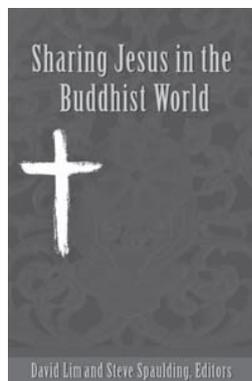
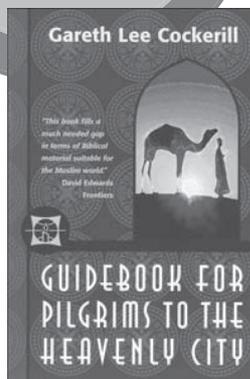
The Catholic Church recognizes the problem because of the defining power for them of Augustine’s *experience* of conversion. Their challenge is to maintain a sacramental view of theology while emphasizing the experiential side of conversion. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults is a movement within the Catholic Church that seeks to promote the process of conversion.

Orthodox. Though similar to the Roman Catholic Church in its strong, priest-centered, liturgically oriented community, the Orthodox Church has been more closely tied to ethnic identity. A recent article on the character of Orthodox churches in the United States thus identifies the various branches of the church by their regional origin: Greek Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, and so forth.²² In speaking of the addition of church members, Archbishop Paul of Finland has said, “Nowadays people become members of the Church in infancy through Holy Baptism.”²³ This comment well expresses the family-oriented, community-based nature of much of Orthodoxy. The strong tie between the church and ethnic communities means that much of the growth is what could be called biological growth. Outreach to others beyond one’s ethnic community has not been a high priority in many Orthodox churches.

Adults wishing to join the Orthodox Church are encouraged to attend an Orthodox church so as to become familiar with the services and how to take part in them. Then, in due course, they are baptized and undergo chrismation, a sacrament similar to confirmation. Once baptized, such a person is a member of God’s family, which is the key issue. “However careless and indifferent the baptized may be in their subsequent life, this indwelling presence of the Spirit is never totally withdrawn. But unless [they] co-operate with God’s grace . . . it is likely that the Spirit’s presence within [them] will remain hidden and unconscious.”²⁴

Salvation is found in the church. Ware quotes approvingly the assertion by Aleksei Khomiakov: “No one is saved alone. He who is saved is saved in the Church, as a member of her and in union with all her other members.” In other words, salvation is ecclesial. Ware adds that salvation is also sacramental, for in the sacraments a person is made one with God.²⁵ In this same vein, Alexander Schmemmann asserts that the mission of the Orthodox Church is found in Word and sacrament. To celebrate the liturgy is to be the kingdom of God; to experience the liturgy is to experience God. “The sacrament is a manifestation of the Word. . . . This is why the reading and preaching of the Gospel in the Orthodox Church is a liturgical act, an integral and essential part of the sacrament.”²⁶ Certainly the apostle Paul would seem to support this view, when he writes, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

The word “conversion” does not seem to be part of the functional vocabulary in the Orthodox Church.²⁷ It is not that Orthodoxy is uninterested in conversion, salvation, justification, or sanctification but that it talks about these realities in a different way. Only when one reads the small but growing missiological



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literature in the Orthodox Church does one begin to hear more familiar words and phrases.²⁸ “The main task of mission is the conversion of those outside the Church. . . . Thus preaching is preaching with a purpose, that people might believe and be converted. ‘Conversion’ is the proper word to use, since those who are outside the Church need to be introduced to the grace of God in Christ. Yet mission is not just to the outsider but also ‘the way in which Church people . . . try to arouse the sleeping faith of the nominal Christian.’”²⁹

Orthodox evangelism has a different tone to it, however. As John Meyendorff states in his introduction to James Stamoolis’s book, “A church can be ‘witnessing’ and therefore preaching through its prayer, through its sense of being ‘different’ from the surrounding society, and through its celebration of the Kingdom of God, present, by anticipation, in the liturgy. The way the Orthodox have succeeded in experiencing their worship as communion with the risen Body of Christ, and in using it as a powerful educational tool, is probably the most distinctive trait of Eastern Christianity, in contrast to the Western tendency of identifying mission with activism and organization.”³⁰ In this view, liturgy itself is the method of evangelism.

Thus the challenge for the Orthodox Church is to invite people convincingly to come into the service of worship; to learn the service and how to participate in it, and so to prepare themselves to be baptized and join the Orthodox Church in order to participate in the mysteries of Christ. In this age of fascination with the spiritual, the Orthodox way will have great appeal to many. It rings of mystery, which is engraved in the buildings themselves, displayed in the multiple icons, and demonstrated in the liturgy. Those from nonliturgical traditions have much to learn about the power of mystery and the appeal of community as we seek to reach out to this current age.

The downside of this approach is the same as for the Roman Catholic Church: when the meaning of ritual is lost, one faces the risk of nominalism. Hence the call in the Orthodox missiological literature to wake the sleeping faith of nominal Christians.

Summation

So who is right? Who has understood accurately the nature of Christian conversion? Who has translated this understanding into an effective ministry of evangelism? Is conversion a matter of making a decision for Jesus? Or joining a church? Or being baptized?

I hope that my position, implied in the discussion so far, is clear: *no single view captures fully the nature of conversion*. All views contribute important parts to a holistic understanding of conversion and hence of evangelism. Holistic evangelism will invite people into the kingdom of God. It will invite them to turn to Jesus in repentance and faith in the context of the community of God’s people, which has worship and the sacraments at its center. Such evangelism will invite nominal Christians to become active followers of Jesus. It will engage genuine seekers as they explore the issues that will move them forward in their pilgrimages. It will not settle for cultural faith. It will have as its goal the genuine conversion of others, even as the evangelists themselves continue their own conversion process.³¹

The Missiological Challenge

While we can and should learn from one another when it comes to conversion, in fact there is much suspicion between Christian traditions over the issue of conversion. For example, evangelicals

feel quite free to seek converts from the Orthodox Church in Russia because, in their eyes, the Orthodox are not real Christians and need to be converted. For their part, the Orthodox in America are quite open to receiving new members from other churches because their church is the one true church. Those outside Orthodoxy are schismatics who need to return home to the real church.³² Mainline Christians are suspicious of all talk of conversion and so resist efforts at conversion, whether these originate from without (proselytizing) or even from within their own

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denomination (sponsored by denominational evangelism commissions). Roman Catholics are baffled when they see fellow Catholics leaving to join a nondenominational charismatic church that is unconnected to historic Christianity.

Given this situation, there is some urgency to expand our understanding of conversion. Our suspicions of one another impede the real task of evangelism, which is to proclaim Christ to those who do not know his name or follow his way.

Is there not a common core of understanding about conversion upon which we can all build? I suggest the following:

1. The real question when it comes to Christian conversion is conscious commitment to Jesus (by repentance and faith). Such a commitment is expressed in a variety of ways—through belief, via baptism and confirmation, in membership and participation in a Christian community, through participation in the sacraments. In the end, *conversion is about the human experience of God’s saving grace*—awareness, consciousness, commitment, deliberately turning one’s life around, coming to a whole new understanding of what life is all about.
2. *Nominalism is an issue in all Christian denominations*. Thus the challenge for all churches is to have in place a vigorous program of spiritual formation with the aim of encouraging ongoing spiritual pilgrimage so that nominal faith will grow into vital faith. Can we not assist one another in such formational activities rather than poaching each other’s members?
3. Different denominations emphasize different issues: belief, liturgy, or membership. The challenge is to *recognize and build upon the evangelistic opportunities that each emphasis affords*. For example, in Orthodox missiological literature, the evangelistic nature of the Great Liturgy is recognized and promoted. And in mainline churches with rich and powerful community in place, can we not with deliberation work at inviting others into this community? Evangelicals have much to contribute in promoting an alternate worldview to that of consensus reality, namely, a worldview that takes seriously the supernatural.
4. Each denomination can and should *grow in its understanding of conversion, without losing touch with its own distinctives*. Evangelicals thus need to become newly interested in incorporating new believers into programs of spiritual formation (which include a renewed sense of worship) as a necessary part of the evangelistic process. Mainline churches need to move beyond comfortable membership to serious consideration of the faith upon which the church stands and deliberate commitment to that which is distinctive to Christianity. Liturgical churches need to translate the meaning of the liturgy into the life, practice, and beliefs of their members. No one church has a complete understanding when it comes to conversion; each church can learn from the others.

5. Do not be preoccupied with conversion, but do not neglect it either. Conversion is only a beginning, merely the first step. It is not the whole of the Christian life. In fact, the proof of conversion is the fruit of one's life. To be preoccupied with conversion only is to neglect what conversion is meant to introduce: life in which there is conscious awareness of God and God's love. To neglect conversion, however, is to forget that all pilgrimages have a beginning; without the beginning, no journey is possible.

It would be ideal if each Christian group could embrace and implement these five points. In the real world, however, change occurs slowly; old animosities die hard, and new ways of viewing the realities closest to us evoke resistance. What might we realistically expect? In the short term our hope might be to influence some within our traditions to broaden their view of

conversion (and hence evangelism). For evangelicals to realize that genuine conversion is a process for most people, not an event, is a significant step forward. And for mainline Christians to explore the difference between nominal and vital faith could bring real change. As for liturgical Christians, to see the power of personal experience in the context of sacramental worship would address some of their issues. Beyond that, it would be wonderful if we looked upon one another less as enemies and more as people whose theological commitments are real, deep, and reasoned, even if we disagree with those reasons. Perhaps we could even learn to cooperate in outreach to those without faith traditions who are fascinated by the spiritual and seeking to know God.

Notes

- Beside works mentioned in the notes below, recently published studies of conversion include Ronald Crandall, *The Contagious Witness: Exploring Christian Conversion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999); Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christianity* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 1999); Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (New York: H. Holt, 1998); Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant, eds., *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies* (New York: Cassell Academic, 1999); Lawrence J. Epstein, *Questions and Answers on Conversion to Judaism* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1998); and Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1999).
- In his masterful volume *Conversion in the New Testament* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994), Ronald Witherup states: "After careful consideration I have come to believe that the NT shows a fairly uniform teaching about conversion with minimal evidence for a dramatic evolution of the concept" (p. 2).
- Richard Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 17–19.
- Scot McKnight, *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), pp. 1–2.
- For a discussion and critique of this view of "witnessing," see my article "Holy Conversation: The Lost Art of Witness," *Word and World* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 255–63.
- In my book I call this approach encounter evangelism. For a critique, see *Conversion in the New Testament*, chap. 11, pp. 285–308.
- Donald Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1997), pp. 171–72.
- When we were students at Fuller Seminary in the 1960s, my wife and I helped start the mission organization African Enterprise, which does citywide evangelism in Africa and elsewhere. When we returned from South Africa, we helped start Clear Light Productions, a media-based evangelistic organization located in Boston. I have been a professor of evangelism at evangelical seminaries for over twenty-five years.
- In *Conversion in the New Testament* I argue for the normalcy of conversion as a process.
- John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985).
- McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, p. 5.
- Donald McKim, "The Mainline Protestant Understanding of Conversion" in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1992), pp. 130–35.
- I say this as a United Church of Christ minister and as one whose role as a seminary professor takes him into a number of mainline contexts.
- G. W. Allport, "The Religious Context of Prejudice," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5 (1966), and Allport and J. M. Ross, "Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 5 (1967): 432–43. See also my discussion of Allport in *Conversion in the New Testament*, pp. 315–16.
- As in the widespread Alpha movement.
- McKnight, *Turning to Jesus*, p. 7.
- Augustine, *Confessions and Enchiridion*, trans. and ed. Albert Outler, as found at Ethereal Library (www.ccel.org), book 8, chap. 11. Deal Hudson calls Augustine's *Confessions* "the dominating text of Catholic conversion" and identifies Augustine as the Catholic convert par excellence ("The Catholic View of Conversion," in *Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Samuel Southard [Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1992], p. 109).
- See Walter Conn, ed., *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1986); Bernard Lonergan, *Grace and Freedom: Operative Grace in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971); and three books by Donald Gelpi, S.J.: *Charism and Sacrament: A Theology of Christian Conversion* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1976); *The Conversion Experience: A Reflective Process for RCIA Participants and Others* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1988); and *Committed Worship: A Sacramental Theology for Converting Christians* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1993).
- Hudson, "Catholic View of Conversion," p. 110.
- Ibid.*, p. 115, quoting Rahner.
- Ritual, though, can lead to genuine inner reality later in life.
- Alexei D. Krindatch, "Orthodox (Eastern Christian) Churches in the United States at the Beginning of a New Millennium: Questions of Nature, Identity, and Mission," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 3 (September 2002): 533–63.
- Archbishop Paul of Finland, *The Faith We Hold*, trans. Marita Nykänen and Esther Williams (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), p. 40.
- Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1986), p. 133. The priest marks the newly baptized with the words "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit."
- Ibid.*, pp. 144–46.
- Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), p. 33. See also pp. 21, 29, 42–44.
- In neither of the standard texts by Father Kallistos Ware in which the Orthodox position is explained to outsiders is "conversion" listed in the index, nor is "justification" or "sanctification"—two words that figure large in Protestant texts on this particular topic.
- See, for example, Ion Bria, ed., *Martyria/Mission: The Witness of the Orthodox Churches Today* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980); Ion Bria, ed., *Go Forth in Peace: Orthodox Perspectives on Mission* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986); James Stamooolis, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 10 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986); George Lemopoulos, ed., *Your Will Be Done: Orthodoxy in Mission* (Geneva:

- WCC Publications, 1989); Luke Alexander Veronis, *Missionaries, Monks, and Martyrs: Making Disciples of All Nations* (Minneapolis: Light & Life Publishing, 1994). I find it interesting that many of these books on missiology are published by non-Orthodox presses.
29. Stamoolis, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*, p. 54. Stamoolis quotes here from N. A. Nissiotis, "The Ecclesiological Foundation of Mission from the Orthodox Point of View," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 7 (1961–62): 31.
30. Stamoolis, *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today*, pp. xi–xii.
31. To continue one's conversion process is an idea drawn from Catholic theology, which understands conversion as something that continues throughout our pilgrimage of faith. Indeed, the same dynamic of repentance and faith that characterizes one's conversion to Christ

- also characterizes the ongoing process of transformation. The issues are different, but the process is the same.
32. Timothy Ware gives a nuanced view of this position: "By God's grace the Orthodox Church possesses the fullness of truth (so its members are bound to believe), but there are other Christian communions which possess to a greater or lesser degree a genuine measure of Orthodoxy. All these facts must be taken into account: one cannot simply say that all non-Orthodox are outside the Church. . . . Such is the view of the more moderate party. But there also exists in the Orthodox Church a more rigorous group, who hold that since Orthodoxy is the Church, anyone who is not Orthodox cannot be a member of the Church" (*The Orthodox Church*, new ed. [Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1993], pp. 308–9).

Implications of Conversion in the Old Testament and the New

Christopher J. H. Wright

The Hebrew word most commonly associated with repentance and conversion—*sub*—is much more often addressed to Israel than used in connection with the other, noncovenant nations.¹ God most eagerly seeks the conversion of his own people, who seem most often bent on turning away from him in the "conversion" of apostasy rather than turning toward him in the conversion of repentance and restoration. The word *sub* is used of turning in either direction. So any missiological reflection on conversion must wrestle with this issue of the continuous need of God's people for radical conversion themselves, rather than being seen only as the agent of the conversion of others. It is often pointed out that the so-called conversion of Cornelius, for example, was just as much (and necessarily) the conversion of Peter, or the conversion of the Ninevites an (unsuccessful) conversion of Jonah.

In this article we examine what the Bible reveals about those who are converted into allegiance to the God of the Bible and into membership of God's people from a position of having previously stood outside that relationship.² What are the implications of such a conversion?

Blessing of the Nations

The familiar words of Genesis 12:3 set the agenda for Israel's missional existence in history. So important are they that Paul calls them the Gospel in advance (Gal. 3:6–8). God declares his intention that through Abraham and his descendants, all nations on earth will be blessed. There is no mention here of this blessing coming by the mechanism of conversion as such. But if the nations are to be blessed, or to find blessing, in the same way as Abraham, then we expect that they must follow the footsteps of his faith in, and obedience to, the God who called him. The path to blessing for Abraham meant leaving his home country (in that sense also turning from his ancestral gods), trusting in the

promise of God, walking in obedience, and teaching his household to "keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice" (Gen. 18:19). Though not described as conversion, some of the key elements are already signaled here: forsaking, trusting, obeying, following.

This hope of blessing for the nations, when it does issue in an offer of, or a call to, conversion, generates some interesting prophetic texts. *Jeremiah* holds out to the nations contemporary with his own the same conditional terms for repentance and restoration that he consistently held out to Judah—at least until Judah had gone beyond the possibility of those options (Jer. 12:14–17). This text is remarkable for the way Jeremiah speaks to the nations words otherwise spoken to his own people. The nations (like Israel) could be uprooted and destroyed, or they could be restored and rebuilt. The deciding factor would be their willingness to (1) identify with and learn the ways of Israel and (2) accept the reality of the living God Yahweh. On those terms they could actually be "established among my people"—a quite remarkable offer, based effectively on conversion. It is difficult for us to grasp this concept of the repentance and conversion of nations (see also 18:1–12), but it stands as an irreducible part of the Old Testament faith.

The Book of *Jonah* stands as the most remarkable illustration of the principles affirmed so starkly in Jeremiah 18. Jonah contains at least two actual conversions (the repentance of the Ninevites and the repentance of Yahweh—his change of plan regarding them) and one conversion stubbornly resisted—that of Jonah himself. If the prophet is intended to represent Israel, then the book is an appeal for their conversion to Yahweh's heartbeat of compassion for the nations.

Isaiah raises the stakes still further. The great vision that he has in common with Micah pictures the nations coming up to Mount Zion in a corporate turning to Yahweh and his ways (Isa. 2:1–5; Mic. 4:1–5). Significantly, the expectation that the nations will eventually do this is taken as motivation for Israel to start doing the same here and now. Isaiah presents this as a challenging call (2:5); Micah states it as a stark contrast between the determination of Israel to walk in the name of Yahweh and the continuing historical fact that the nations walk in the name of their own gods (4:5).

In Isaiah 19, after a scorching declaration of God's judgment

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