

CONVINCE

How and why we turn to God.

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Crisis. A simple, momentary crisis. That is how a significant part of the evangelical world encourages us to think about conversion. And sometimes, of course, it happens that way, outside as well as inside revivalistic circles. Think of Augustine, hearing a child say, "Take up and read," picking up a Bible and seeing Romans 13:13, and never being the same again.

But our turning to God is better understood as a complex process. Indeed, we often refer to conversion as a single act of turning in the same way we speak of consuming several dishes and drinks as a single act of dining. Even Augustine's dramatic conversion was preceded by years of seeking. A process is at work, whether or not our conversion culminates in a crisis afterward remembered as "the hour I first believed." This involves thinking and rethinking; doubting and overcoming doubts; soul-searching and self-admonition; wrestling with feelings of guilt and shame; and assaying what following Christ might mean.

Unfortunately, some decisions that occur within the structural pattern of revivalistic evangelism are preceded by little of this soul travail. They prove hollow, and when a mere 10 percent of the professed converts in a crusade are still faithful after a year, evangelists and pastors pronounce it a great success. What happens to the substantial number of people who "decide" for Christ but find their decision was apparently empty of spiritual reality? We would be wise to consider the nature of conversion more carefully than we have in the past.

In understanding conversion, none would argue with the idea that evan-

gelical faith is knowledge of, assent to, and trust in Christ and God's promise of grace through him, that evangelical repentance is turning from sin, now recognized as ruinous, to a new life of following Christ in righteousness, and embraced as the only hope of life. A person comes to faith and repentance by coming to understand, believe, and perceive the application to himself or herself of the gospel message.

But how does this happen? We need to understand better the how and why of conversion.

Who converts?

A good place to start is to note the argument of those who discount the truth of the Christian faith on the grounds that only certain "types" of people are believers, or that only people from certain backgrounds come to faith. This approach reduces conversion to nothing more than a process to which some people are especially vulnerable. The truth of Christian faith therefore is seen to be only an expression of personal need: What accounts for belief, it is claimed, is internal and not external. It is psychological and not theological. It is the result of personal preference or sociological standing and not of public truth.

What is overlooked in all of this, however, is that there are no such patterns of belief. There are no people whom we can predict will be believers. On the contrary, what has always been striking is the social, economic, and psychological diversity within the church.

The reason is that people come to saving faith not because of a natural disposition toward the truth but because of the initiative of God in grace that brings into his kingdom those who are not only diverse but who, if left to themselves, would never enter this kingdom. We cannot predict that some

people, because of personality, psychological need, or economic circumstance will become believers. Nor are there any whose personality or life experience can successfully insulate them from the glorious intrusion of God's grace.

The Acts of the Apostles provides a number of illustrations of this. In chapters 8-16 we meet people with vastly different backgrounds who are brought to faith in Christ in different circumstances, and yet at the end share a common faith.

In chapter 8, for example, there is the account of the conversion of an Ethiopian leader. He is described as a responsible man (8:27), on a pilgrimage, reading the Jewish scriptures (8:28), and, according to the conversation recorded there, he is eager to learn about the new faith (8:31, 34). In the next chapter there is the well-known account of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, an insider conversant with the beliefs of the early Christians. Soon we read about a woman who was a "worshiper of God" (16:14). We are told that she met with her friends for discussion, and it seems that the apostle Paul on some occasions joined the group. Once she became acquainted with the details of the Christian message, she became a Christian (16:15). Later in the same chapter, however, we have a contrast in the stressful and traumatic circumstances surrounding the conversion of the jailer at Philippi.

These episodes illustrate a variety of experiences and backgrounds surrounding Christian conversion, and a range of psychological processes and mechanisms at work. In each case, the outcome was the same: belief in God and faith in Christ. But if one were to focus just on the psychological aspects of the conversions, one would probably miss the most important aspect: the truth

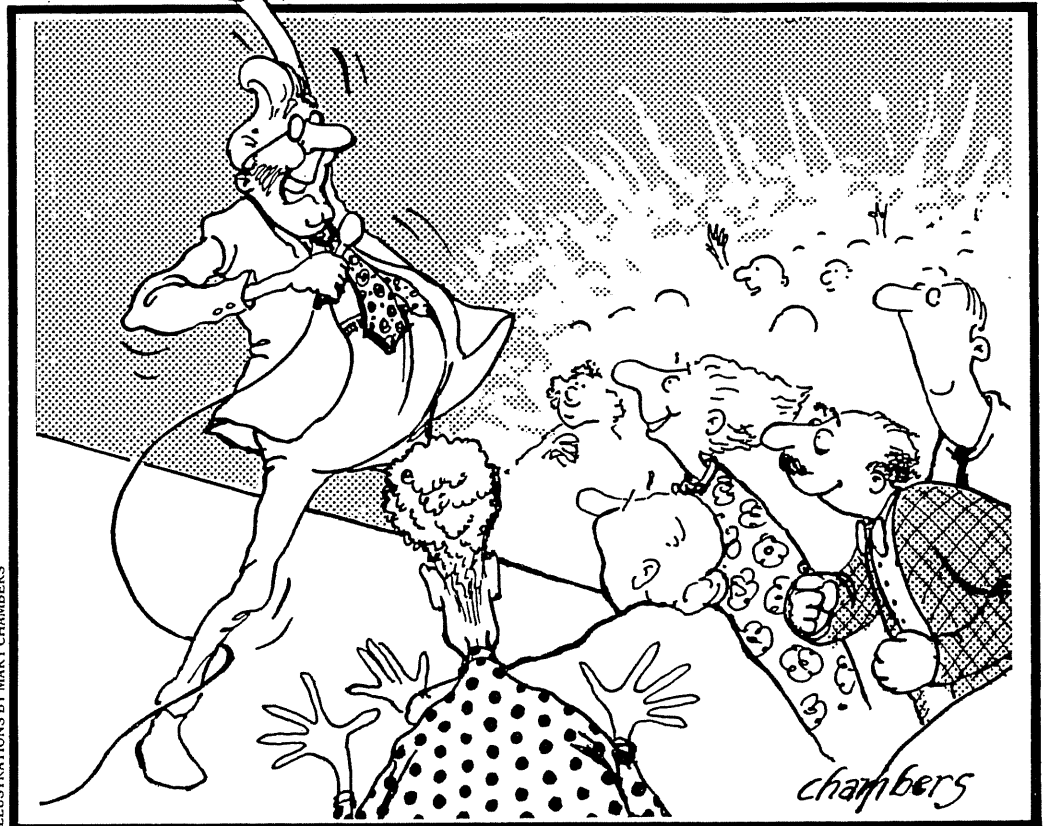
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that grips the minds of the hearers, not just that which stirs their emotions.

Over the last century there have been many attempts to develop a psychological profile of a typical convert, but the search for correlations between religious beliefs and measurable personality traits has been on the whole disappointing. For example, in 1962 Prof. L. B. Brown studied 200 university students and found the correlation between their religious beliefs and a standard measure of neuroticism was an insignificant 0.03. A much older study (1951) involved 900 students and found no systematic relationship between personality profile and membership in a religious group. From these and similar studies it seems quite clear that the relationship between religiosity and general personality traits is weak.

And even if different personality characteristics influence the nature of conversion experiences, more important factors may include a person's age at the time of conversion and his or her denominational affiliation. Extensive studies on the expression of religious belief and commitment at various ages, for example, identify differences in infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle life, and old age (CT, Aug. 20, 1990, pp. 23-25).

Denominational attachments may also result in different conversion experiences and in the way these conversions are reported and evaluated. Denominations have unique expecta-



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"Come and get it."

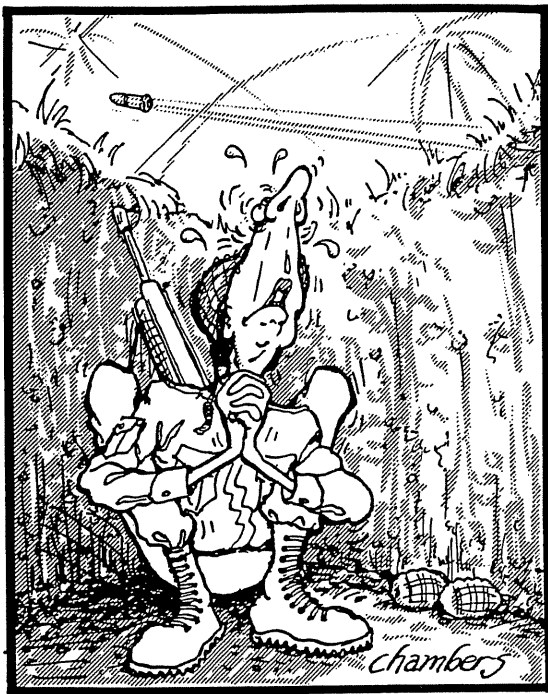
tions for the ways religious conversion should take place and be reported within their circles. Detailed psychological studies are not necessary to convince one of this. One only has to listen to testimonies given in different denominations and in different cultures. One finds that a crisis conversion, such as occurs at the front of the church or an arena, is not the only way, nor even the model way, in which people are savingly drawn to Christ. Conversion—and the kind of person who undergoes conversion—defies stereotyping.

This diversity of experiences, however, should not be misinterpreted to suggest a diversity of *gospel*. Different paths toward Christ are not different

religious roads to him. Christ is not experienced in just any form of belief; he is not to be found in Hinduism, or Buddhism, or secularism. He is to be found only through the truths of the Christian gospel. There is only one Lord and one faith, one God and one work of Atonement, one unique Son and one conquest of evil on the Cross. In our submission, he is believed in the same way through the same gospel by all.

A sketch of the process

How, then, do we come into saving faith? What is the process? There is, of course, no "model" experience, for culture, personality, and life experience greatly influence how a person comes



"Anything you say, Lord."

to Christ. And there are a number of ways to view this process.

Missiologist Alan Tippett has outlined a common sequence that may be brief or long in its unfolding. First, there is a developing awareness within the person that he or she is adrift, estranged from God. At this stage the person becomes aware of, or identifies, a problem. A second stage follows, wherein the individual considers the essentials of faith, cognitively or doctrinally framed, as a possible solution to the problem. This, under the Spirit's guidance and because of his work, leads to the acceptance of Christ and his death and submission to him as Lord.

M. Heirich suggests another useful model, one based on historian of science Thomas Kuhn's understanding of the development of scientific theories. Kuhn argued that scientists work with various theoretical models of knowledge that, while not perfect, are sufficiently coherent to provide a framework for research. Gradually, however, as knowledge develops, inconsistencies arise that initially extend the model. If they become too substantial, the existing paradigm is challenged as inadequate and a whole new paradigm emerges, a process Kuhn called a "paradigm shift." The emergence of the theory of relativity is a good example of a profound change in model that became necessary as the evidence for traditional physics was no longer adequate.

Like Tippett, Heirich sees a close par-

allel in the realignment of thinking that goes on in the consideration prior to conversion, leading to the ultimate abandonment of the old world view in favor of a more satisfying one.

How much do we need to know?

Thinking about shifts in understanding raises another issue. How much do we need to know to experience such reorientation and conversion? The answer is best given in functional terms: We need as much knowledge as will bring us to an awareness of ourselves as sinners, sufficient knowledge to understand how Christ will "solve" the problem we are sensing, adequate knowl-

edge to see how the world will look from within life in Christ, and enough knowledge to know what is asked of us as we believe the gospel and what will be required of us after we believe it.

Providing this knowledge not only establishes the basis for a relationship with Christ but it also prevents evangelism from trading on misapprehension or employing manipulative devices. The convert comes into faith responsibly and the evangelist can be confident that the gospel has not been offered under false pretenses.

But relating to another person always involves more emotion, thought, and awareness than ever gets articulated in our conversations. What is verbalized never plumbs the depth and power of the relationship. We need not wonder, then, when genuine faith and repentance results from amazingly little—we would have said inadequate—formal instruction.

Certainly, faithful preachers, teachers, and evangelists will conscientiously labor to instill full understanding of the whole gospel—creation, sin, God's holiness and love, Incarnation and Atonement, repentance and faith, new life in Christ, and the mission of the church. They will look to God to bless the truth that they teach, and not to expect anyone to be converted without adequate knowledge. At the same time, however, they will be prepared to find that God has gone ahead of them and has blessed very little formal knowl-

edge, producing real and vibrant faith in Christ.

Preparing the way

How does a person prepare for conversion? And how much preparation is necessary? Once more, the only possible answer is the functional one: whatever it takes to bring a person to belief that the gospel is true, and to a sufficient falling out of love with sin and sufficient gratitude to Jesus for opening the door to a new and godly way of living. This is not, however, an endorsement of the doctrine (feared by many, though held by very few) that only one who has undergone a long period of heavy contrition is qualified to come to Christ. The legalistic "preparationism" that was allegedly taught by the Puritans and others who supposedly stressed the need for deep conviction of sin and labored to induce it is, in truth, a figment of critics' imaginations. The Puritans (and their admirers, past and present) actually maintained that only one who has come thoroughly to hate sin can turn wholeheartedly from it to Christ.

Contrition is necessitated not by the terms of the gospel, which calls us to Christ directly, but by the state of the fallen human heart. God uses the law to pave the way for the gospel by making us see not only our guilt but also the ugliness, nastiness, and repulsiveness of our previous ways, so that we cease to love them. That sets us free to love Christ when he calls us to follow him wherever he leads.

The alternative is the false conversion that is illustrated by seed falling on stony ground in Jesus' parable of the soils (Matt. 13:5-9). Today we see people who have been pressured to make decisions, who received the word of pardon and peace with joy, and who promise to follow Christ from then on, but then find the old way of Christlessness and sin more attractive than the new way of resisting sin out of loyalty to Christ and suffering in consequence (see Heb. 12:3-4). So they go rapidly back to their old ways. Whatever inner conviction and change was experienced never went deep enough to make the life of sin intolerable forever after, or to produce clear understanding that Christ will only save us from sin, never in sin.

Beyond counterfeit conversions

If we are to avoid producing false conversions, we must make much of the

law, sin, and repentance, and not press people for "raised hands" of decision until we have done all we can to make sin hateful in their eyes and have reason to think they have received this part of the message. For all we do, however, we must also keep in mind that this deep conviction of sin comes only from the Holy Spirit's application of the word we communicate.

Some argue that this talk about sin and about the need to recognize our own sinfulness is a pathological way of dealing with internal crises. This argument has often been made by those in Freudian circles. But as often happens, the mindset of the researcher seems to influence heavily what he or she finds. Psychologists committed to Christian faith have found evidence for thinking that conversion is not regressive and pathological but part of a normal,

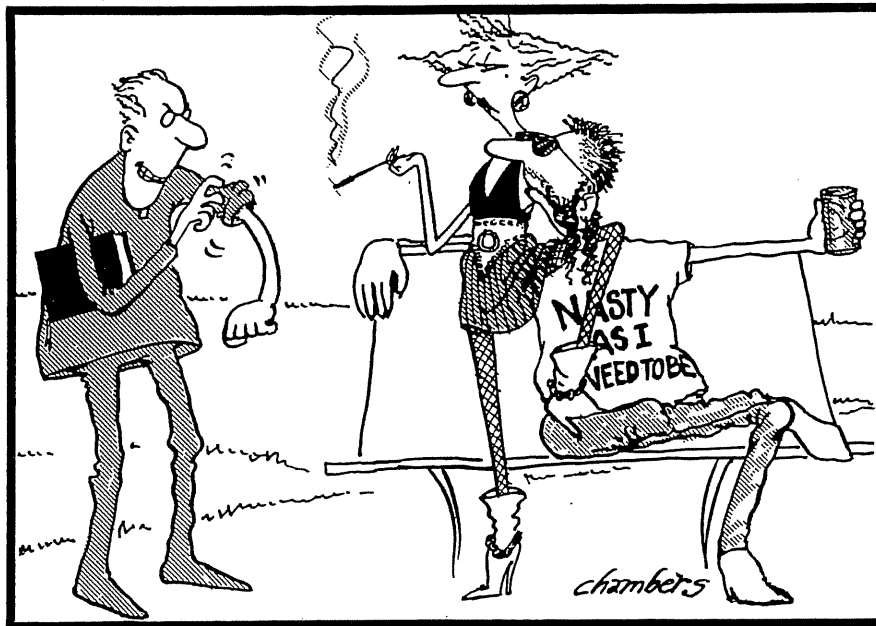
And even when faith answers great inner needs, this is no argument against its validity. Indeed, in his study of 3,574 converts, psychologist R. Wallace discovered that faith addresses us in four areas: in our need for social contact, for stability, for solidarity (belonging), and for others' constructive influence. A person with social needs feels that others do not sufficiently appreciate him or her. Faith answers this need both through assurance of God's love (appreciation) for the person and by the concrete mediation of that love in the context of the faith community. A person going through life transitions and great uncertainty needs stability, such as can be found in spiritual certainties and in relationships in the faith community. A person who has not inherited foundational values from the family needs solidarity and a sense of belong-

personal alienation (we sense ourselves to be adrift, to have no moorings, to have no clear focus, no solid core to our lives) is alienation from God. Once we understand that we are alienated from God—that we have substituted ourselves for him, have created our own norms and values in place of his, have seen ourselves as the center of life instead of him—then we easily understand that these inner needs are consequences of our sinful behavior. These consequences, these deficits, are addressed in the gospel not simply as an addition to our lives, but as the reordering agent that establishes life on such a footing that the deficits can be addressed by God himself.

What counts more than "decisions"

We have seen that a decision for Christ is not the real measure of a conversion, although a conversion may occur in and through such a decision. Decisions undertaken without sufficient self-awareness or awareness of ourselves as sinners before God (however that awareness translates into felt needs) will be hollow. Decisions made in the absence of an adequate knowledge of God, his truth, and his Christ will likely be malformed and therefore lacking in direction and staying power. Decisions that occur in either of these ways are decisions brought about by pressures that should be considered manipulative: the crowd or circle of friends who exert psychological pressure or the evangelist who does a "hard sell" and is so charismatic in personality or in presentation that the convert is drawn irresistibly to the point of decision. This person is also being drawn foolishly and, perhaps, unethically.

Decisions are not what counts. What does count are men and women who, knowing themselves to be rebels and alienated from God, have sought in his Christ forgiveness and acceptance and, having sought and trusted, have been renewed by the Spirit and are spurred on to a life of truthfulness and love. □



"Go ahead—make my day."

healthy development. Indeed, in one study, mentally ill people were discovered to be significantly less religious than the general population. The truth, of course, is that religious faith can become a part of, or be the evidence of, a person's disorientation, even as it can be the cause and consequence of his reorientation. Those arguing that conversion is retrogressive have simply not made a successful case. We can make a better case for the argument that religion, specifically Christian faith, is able to bring a person through crisis to wholeness and a constructive approach to life, provided the turning is authentic.

ing to a community. And a person with influence needs significant links to those who have strong faith, such as a church or Bible study can provide.

Some people do not sense these needs very strongly, for they perceive themselves to be free of deficits. Others may have been so traumatized by their upbringing that, though they sense these needs deeply, conversion is almost unthinkable. Conversion calls for trust, but their whole inner life is built around distrust.

These needs correlate with the framework provided by law and gospel. The key to social alienation (we are not appreciated sufficiently by others) and

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