

Both Evangelical and Progressive Christians Called to Rethink Conversion

The Wired Word for the Week of July 31, 2022

In the News

Though evangelical Christians are more likely to talk about conversion than are progressive Christians, the latter shouldn't give up on conversion, declares an article this month in *The Christian Century*, a progressive Christian publication.

The writer, Samuel Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London, articulates some reasons why many mainline churches speak of conversion little or not at all, including the assertion that "conversion is all about the airport and silent about the trip," and the claim that a demand that one must be converted to enter the Christian faith is manipulation by those who wield religion as power.

But Wells goes on to point out that "Christianity is a priceless blessing and a profound good," that can heal the wounds of our past, dismantle our anxiety about the future and enable us in the present to love others. "This isn't the thoughtless imposition of an imperialistic agenda," said Wells, "it's the humble sharing of deep truth" Thus, the invitation to convert is "not shouting, 'You have to believe this to belong.' It's saying, 'Try this; it actually works.'"

Wells further said that the invitation to convert shows that Christians place trust in the notion of change. "Conversion is the name for the way a person's heart and soul and actions can change for good when they encounter the embrace of God's ever-loving arms," said Wells.

Further, noted Wells, conversion affirms that out of the deepest hostility the greatest good can come. "Through conversion the Holy Spirit takes the worst in the world, the worst in our society, the very worst parts of ourselves and turns them into the principal instruments of God's kingdom and channels of Christ's peace," Wells said.

Progressives are not the only Christians who are being called to rethink conversion. In recent years, many evangelical churches are also moving toward a broader understanding of that subject that leaves behind what might be called "revivalism."

Gordon T. Smith, president of Ambrose University and Seminary, in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, has written about this in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, an excerpt of which is reprinted in the *Christianity Today* article below. (*Christianity Today* is an evangelical Christian publication.)

In the past, "Evangelicals took for granted that the language and categories of revivalism were the language and categories of the New Testament," said Smith. "Conversion was viewed to be a

punctiliar experience: persons could specify with confidence and assurance the time and place of their conversion, by reference, as often as not, to the moment when they prayed what was typically called 'the sinner's prayer,'" which is a prayer of repentance.

"The focus of conversion was the afterlife: ... so that one could 'go to heaven' after death," Smith said. "And if one had 'received Christ,' one could be confident of one's eternity with God." Smith noted that "conversion was isolated from the experience of the church. Indeed, it was generally assumed that a person would come to faith outside of the church and then be encouraged, after conversion, to join a church community."

In contrast to that, said Smith, evangelicals are re-envisioning the nature of conversion and redemption. "Increasingly, there is appreciation that conversion is a complex experience by which a person is initiated into a common life with the people of God who together seek the in-breaking of the kingdom, both in this life and in the world to come," said Smith. "This experience is mediated by the church and thus necessarily includes baptism as a rite of initiation. The power or energy of this experience is one of immediate encounter with the risen Christ ... and this experience is choreographed by the Spirit rather than evangelistic techniques."

Evangelical Christianity is a very large tent, and not every denomination within it would see its understanding of conversion as defined by Smith's description.

What's more, discussions of conversion, whether from evangelical Christians or progressive Christians, are made more complex by recognition by many that not all followers of Jesus start with a conversion experience; some people simply accept the tenets of the faith and receive Christ as part of their spiritual growth process.

Additionally, when some people speak of Christian conversion, they have in mind a *sudden* experience. But many people say that the conversion they experienced was but the final step in a process that had been going on for some time, with various thoughts, yearnings and dissatisfactions incubating in their minds that moved them toward the "decision for Christ."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Three Reasons Progressive Christians Shouldn't Give Up on Conversion.](#) *Christian Century*
[The New Conversion: Why We 'Become Christians' Differently Today.](#) *Christianity Today*
[Conversion to Christianity.](#) *Wikipedia*

The Big Questions

1. If you had what you consider a Christian conversion experience, do you, in retrospect, think you would have eventually made the same commitment without that experience? Why or why not? If you have not had a Christian conversion experience, but consider yourself to have "grown into" the faith, do you feel you missed anything, spiritually speaking? Why or why not?
2. To what degree was your decision to receive Christ a sudden one? To what degree was your decision the next step in a growth process?

3. Why is, or is not, the absence of a personal conversion story in a believer's life a shortcoming in terms of that person's acceptance by God and Christ?

4. What do you take this criticism of conversion to mean: "Conversion is all about the airport and silent about the trip"? Is the criticism valid? Why or why not?

5. Preacher and author Frederick Buechner says "To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, 'I'm sorry,' than to the future and saying, 'Wow!'" In what way does this make sense to you? In what ways does it not make sense to you?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Isaiah 55:7

*... let the wicked forsake their way
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

(For context, read [Isaiah 55:6-9](#).)

Acts 3:19-20

Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus ... (For context, read [Acts 3:17-21](#).)

In the Bible, conversion and repentance are often linked. The text from Isaiah was originally written in Hebrew, and the Hebrew word for conversion is *shub*, which means "to turn" or "to return," which is how it is translated in the Isaiah verse.

The Acts passage was originally written in Greek, and the Greek word for repent is *metanoia*, which means "to think differently." It's rendered in Acts 3:19 simply as "repent." But that verse also uses the Greek word *epistrepho*, which means "to turn toward." It's rendered as "turn to God" in Acts 3.

As defined by *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*, "To be converted means to have the direction of one's life shifted, so that it no longer points toward self, but points toward God."

Questions: The Isaiah verse is addressed to the "wicked" and the "unrighteous." Does that mean conversion is not necessary for those who are not wicked? Why or why not? The Acts passage is addressed to people who presumably had been in the crowd calling for Jesus' crucifixion? Does that mean others need not repent? Why or why not?

Romans 3:21-24

But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ[a] for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they

are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... (For context, read [Romans 3:21-31](#).)

Romans 3:21-24 (The Message)

But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ. (For context, read [Romans 3:21-31](#).)

Both entries above are the same passage of scripture from the apostle Paul, but the first is from our default translation (The NRSV) and the second is from the Bible paraphrase, *The Message*. We've used the former because it echoes phrases you've likely heard before -- "all have sinned" and "justified by his grace" -- and the latter because we believe its wording makes the passage clearer to understand. But in either version, these are words that are often used as the basis for discussions of conversion.

In short, Paul is saying that the death of Jesus has fully atoned for the sinfulness of humankind and that God's righteousness is freely offered to sinners who receive it by faith as an unmerited gift of grace.

Questions: What does "justified" mean here? Is this passage by itself sufficient to explain the gospel? Why or why not? What would you want to say is the next step beyond this one?

Acts 9:3-6

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." (For context read [Acts 9:1-9](#).)

This is from the account of Saul's (Paul's) blinding-light episode on the Damascus road, which most Bible readers understand as a conversion experience.

That requires some definition, however. It would be inaccurate to say that Saul ceased being a Jew and became a Christian. (Some people suggest this because Saul was his Hebrew name and Paul was his Roman name, and the writer of Acts uses his Roman name more often after the Damascus road encounter. But Paul was known by both names before and after that experience.) Nonetheless, Paul's blinding-light experience can legitimately be called a conversion because it was a dramatic turning point for Paul, a radical change of heart and mind, from following an extremist mindset, to serving the Lord of love, Jesus Christ.

At that time, Christianity had not yet separated itself from Judaism and there was no organized "Christianity" as such. Paul became a follower of Jesus, but still practiced the faith of his fathers and mothers. He still practiced the faith of his ancestors.

Many of the characteristics that marked Paul before his conversion continued afterward, such as his single-minded pursuit of a goal, although now, his goal changed. His acquired knowledge, of course, continued as well, but he now put that at the disposal of Christ. Paul was able to quote Greek writers such as Epimenides, Aristeus, and the comic playwright Menander in his letters, and to use athletic imagery, suggesting his exposure to athletic contests were part of a life with a foot in two worlds. (This might suggest that converts don't have to throw out their Led Zeppelin albums, or stop reading Douglas Adams, but there will be some new stuff to listen to and read as well.) Repentance means a changing of the mind and seeing the same things in a different light. Saul/Paul kept a foot in two worlds and that's why he had two names. But now that he was converted, the kingdom of God took first place.

Christianity, the Way, the Jesus movement, the church, whatever you choose to call it, involves a measure of interpretation and reinterpretation. After conversion, Jesus becomes the filter through which we see the world. As Paul wrote, "We preach Christ and him crucified." A cruciform is a different perspective on the world, and it's a perspective we invite others to join. It's the world Martha inhabits and one that allows her, despite her anger at Jesus for not coming in time to heal her brother Lazarus, still to make her extraordinary statement of faith, the kind of faith that sustains us in the midst of loss and grief.

Questions: Paul traveled 150 miles to Damascus to expand what had started as a local persecution of believers in Jerusalem. What does this tell you about Paul? Where do you see that same kind of intensity in Paul following his blinding-light encounter with Christ?

2 Corinthians 5:17

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! (For context, read [2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#).)

Questions: In what ways is this verse a description of what conversion may look like? may feel like?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this: A TWW team member tells of hearing a testimony from a man who'd been converted at a Salvation Army mission. He'd been literally a "bum" (his description) when he stumbled drunk into the mission station. He came for the free dinner but stayed for the service, and when the preacher issued an "altar call," this man found himself going forward, where a Salvation Army worker counseled him and prayed with him.

That night was the "big turnaround," the man said (he went on to become a productive member of society). And though it doesn't often happen this way, he didn't drink again after his trip to the altar. But he said that in many ways, *his conversion was only a start*. He felt that his sins had been forgiven, but in most ways, he was the same self-centered, profane, bigoted, uncaring person he'd been -- except that now, he was attending worship services where he prayed

and started listening for God. He told how, one by one, God revealed things to him he needed to give up or rethink or do differently or take on if he was to continue following Jesus, and little by little, he began to make those adjustments -- more conversions, if you will. He never said he had "arrived," but he had a sense of where -- and toward Whom -- he was headed.

While not using language about "many conversions," C.S. Lewis, made a similar point using a house for a metaphor:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. ... But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of -- throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage; but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.

2. If you have or can borrow a copy of Kathleen Norris' book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (many libraries have it), read and discuss her chapter titled, "Conversion: The Family Story."

3. What opportunities will you seek to refuel or renew your Christian journey?

Responding to the News

This might be a good time to think about how you came to faith and to ask yourself if, in turning from something to something better, you've really completed the process. Or is more turning necessary?

Prayer

In whatever way I have come to Christ, O Lord, make me a good disciple. In Jesus' name. Amen.