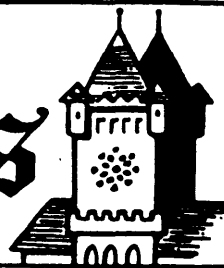


# The Geneva Papers



No. 33

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November, 1984

## CONVERSION

by James B. Jordan

My purpose in this essay is not to provide a complete theology of conversion, but to comment on an experience I had last summer. I was invited to speak at a conservative Presbyterian church. I spoke in the morning, and in addition to the regular congregation I found I was speaking to a group of bright-eyed college students, who were in the area for the summer. As part of a basically Campus Crusade oriented ministry, this group of students was working at earning money for tuition during the week, attending Bible classes in the evenings, and doing beach evangelism on the weekends. This kind of thing is very common, and I was personally pleased to meet these young people. I was also happy to see that this conservative Presbyterian church had become their home for the summer, welcoming them into its fellowship.

As I said above, I spoke in the morning. The evening service was put on by the students, it being their last Sunday in the area. They had formed a chorus, and sang some of the modern post-Jesus movement songs which are the standard (and sadly superficial) fare among these groups. They also gave testimonies, and one of them preached to the congregation.

As I listened to the testimonies, and to the little sermonette, I realized that there was a time when this kind of thing would have moved me, but that it no longer seemed very relevant. Was this because my own faith had grown cold? I hope not. Was this because their method of presenting the gospel was so grossly off-base as to be unacceptable? Well, this is sometimes asserted in "hard-core Reformed" circles, and I once felt this way myself. But as I thought about it, I came to a different conclusion, and this essay is the result.

Let me encapsulate one of the testimonies I heard. A young woman got up and said something like this: "When I went to college, I thought I was a good Christian. I didn't use dope, and I'd grown up in a good Christian home and had been active in a good Christian church. But I found out that I wasn't *really* a Christian. I had to break some idols in my heart, and meet Jesus *personally*."

"There was this boy, you see. We'd been dating seriously, but he was not a Christian. I didn't want to give him up. I found myself in more and more tension over this, and finally I got down and prayed that Jesus would just take over. I was finally willing to give up this boy. And you know what? We broke it off, and I've never missed him since. I've found something more wonderful to live for. I hope you do to."

Now remember, the people she was addressing with this testimony were mostly well over 30 years of age. Many were

over 50. I could tell that they were delighted that she had found Christ, but I could also tell that they did not really connect up with her experience readily.

Now, the testimony I just rehearsed for you is a standard testimony ritual. Impressionable young people take up the forms and attitudes of influential elder people who minister to them, and this kind of testimony ritual is standard in campus ministries. Point 1: I thought I was already a Christian. Point 2: I realized I was not, because I had not given *all* to Him. Point 3: I gave it all to Him, and found peace. Point 4: You can too.

Now, is there something *wrong* with all this? Well, clearly not, in one sense, but in another sense there is something wrong. What is wrong is that there is an erroneous understanding of conversion operating here.

### What is Conversion?

Conversion is a turning from sin to Christ. Now, let's think about that. Does conversion happen only once in a lifetime, or does it happen many times? That is the question, I believe, which needs answering.

From my experience, and from my understanding of the Bible and of Christianity, there are four kinds of conversion experiences. First, for a person totally outside the faith, there is an initial conversion experience when that person comes to Christ for the first time. This kind of conversion has become the norm for everyone, unfortunately, even though it applies to relatively few Christian people.

Secondly, there is daily conversion. Each day, and many times during the day, we have to turn from sinful tendencies, and turn back to Christ. These "little turnings" are so many daily conversions. By magnifying the initial conversion experience, modern evangelism does not say enough about daily conversion.

Third, there are what I call "crisis conversions." There are crisis points in every Christian's life. At these crisis points, the Christian needs to reaffirm his or her faith by making a major break with some problem that has crept up, and make a major turn toward Christ.

Fourth, there are what I called "stage conversions." By this I don't mean conversions that are merely put on for show. Rather, I mean that God brings Christians through various stages of growth and maturity, and at each stage it is necessary for the Christian to come to a fuller understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

Now, I don't think enough justice is done to this matter of stages of life. As a person grows, his understanding of himself, of the world, and of God will change, because he is him-

self changing. His understanding grows wider, and embraces more factors of life. He becomes aware of things he was not aware of before. Moreover, his understanding grows deeper, and more profound. Learning to adjust to a spouse, and then to children; learning to adjust to authorities on the job, and learning how to relate to subordinates; learning how to manage money; etc.—all of these things cause a person to deepen and widen his understanding. Hopefully, they cause a person to become more and more wise and stable.

These changes of understanding happen slowly and gradually, without our being aware of them. One day, however, we wake up and realize that we have changed. I am not the same person I was ten years ago, I realize. And my understanding of God and of His ways, of what it means to be a Christian, had better change too. My faith needs to deepen and broaden. Once again, I need to give *all* to Him. My understanding of "all" has expanded!

This means that the kind of Christian experience I may have had in college is not the norm for my entire life. This is the important point. The college-type Christian conversion experience may be a very important and necessary *stage* in my Christian development, but it would be wrong (even perverse) for me to try continually to keep up that-kind of "light-hearted" Christian experience in the midst of a mature adult world, with all its cares, responsibilities, and tribulations.

This is why the kind of testimonies these college students were making before the Presbyterian congregation seemed off base to me. They were not really relevant to my stage of life as a 34-year old family man. I could appreciate and rejoice in what the Lord was doing with them, but I also saw that He was not doing quite the same thing with me.

Between my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college, I too was "converted." I read Billy Graham's *World Aflame*, and I came to understand for the first time that I had to be justified apart from any of my own works and intentions. I accepted Christ into my heart, and for a month I was on a kind of "honeymoon" with the Lord. For years, I told people that I had not been a Christian before, only a "good Churchgoer." I now no longer tell people that.

Was I not a Christian before? Was the young woman whose testimony I reproduced above not really a Christian before she went to college? I think I was, and I think she was, too. What happened was that we came to a new stage of maturity, a stage at which we needed to understand in a new, more profound way, what the Christian faith entails. We went through a crisis, and experienced a conversion.

I believed in Jesus when I was little, and I'm sure she did to. We were both loyal to Him. We kept His rules. We went to His church. We sang hymns to Him. We had the kind of faith appropriate for the childish stage of life. When we got to age 17, however, we needed to deepen our faith. We went through a crisis. We had a conversion.

Now, the problem comes in the notion that this experience is *the one and only conversion for one's whole life*. If we think that way, we always look backwards to that conversion. We want to recapture the simplicity of that initial warm experience of the love and acceptance of God, and this is a mistake. It freezes faith at an immature level, and prevents us from pressing on to maturity. People influenced by this way of thinking tend to want to recover the experiences of their late teen years.

(To take a parallel example, we see this most commonly in the way people retain a strong, often binding affection for whatever kind of music they listened to in their late teens. People who danced to Lawrence Welk's "champagne music" were horrified when their teenagers liked the Beatles. Now

the Beatles generation has its own children, and they are horrified at modern punk rock. The beatnik generation, which came in between, still clings to the sounds of off-beat folk music. There is nothing necessarily wrong with some of this music, and there is nothing wrong with an occasional nostalgia for childhood, but there can be a real problem when this nostalgia becomes an intransigent refusal to mature.

(Continuing this parenthesis: America is a strange culture. It glorifies youth, and it provides most people with the means to surround themselves with youthful fictions. Women at 30 years of age, after having children, want to be as slim and weightless as they were at age 18, a manifest impossibility. Similarly, the phonograph record and the cassette tape enable people to continue the experience of late teen years via music. Thus, that this kind of intransigent nostalgia is present in the area of faith is no surprise, but it is regrettable. We are called to press on to maturity—in every area of life.)

Thus, I appreciate the "Campus Crusade" type of college conversion experience. I think it is healthy for many young people, and I don't think it harms anyone. (After all, if the reprobate don't persevere in the faith, that is their fault.) The problem is in making this kind of youthful experience the norm for mature Christian faith.

### The Abundant Life

The youthful campus evangelists who addressed us in church that Sunday evening were very concerned that we come to know the "more abundant life that earth can never give." I got the impression that these young people suspected that we stodgy old folks just were not experiencing the abundant life!

Scripture clearly tells us that Christ's offers a more abundant life. The question, however, is this: Abundant in terms of what? What a teenager *perceives* as the abundant life may not be (and should not be) the same as what a 35 year old homemaker or laborer perceives as abundant living. First of all, the glandular/emotional quality of life at 18 is not the same as it is at 35. So, how we *feel* about Christ when we are 18 is not likely to be the same as how we feel about Him when we are 35, or 70.

Second, as mentioned above, we mature as we get older (hopefully). Maturity includes an expanded horizon of awareness of the world and life. It includes an expanded sense of time, and of how much time it takes to accomplish some matters (even many generations of time). It includes a more profound awareness of pain and suffering. All these grow with age.

Moreover, at about age 30, we begin to become much more aware of debilitation and death. We begin to realize that in fact not all our goals are going to be met. The golden dreams of youth have become tarnished. All the problems are not going to be overcome. Thus, as we get older we begin to appreciate more and more that this life is transitory. It is a trial run. What we accomplish here is indeed important, but none of us is going to accomplish anywhere near all we set out to accomplish. And, we begin to realize that there is much pain and weakness which will not be overcome in this life, and we shall simply have to endure it. This is a much more sober outlook on life than that of the college student.

Young people should dream dreams, and I am glad for the brand of "abundant life" I experienced in college. In fact, however, I am older now, and that kind of Christian experience is not for me. The mature brand of the abundant life is more serious (and in fact, it is more abundant!).

### Reactions

Let us return now to the matter of conversion experiences. The neo-Puritan movement reacted strongly against "easy believism." From my experience, they tended to substitute "hard believism" for it. The neo-Puritans complained that the campus conversion experience is too superficial: People aren't warned about hell, about the suffering that Christians will face, about predestination, etc., etc.

My problem with the neo-Puritan critique of campus conversion experiences is the same as my problem with campus conversionism. Both groups act as if some big crisis or decision were necessary to come into the faith. Both groups ignore the reality of the faith of young children. (In fact, both groups are heavily Baptist, thus typically American, in orientation; the neo-Puritans being almost to a man Reformed Baptists.) Both groups put too much the stress on an initial conversion experience. The neo-Puritans don't like the soft-sell "easy" conversion; they want a hard-sell gospel with all the hard facts brought out first. They seem to want to manipulate "true conversions," and eliminate "stony ground and thorny ground" conversions. This, however, I do not think is Biblical. The Sower sowed the stony and the thorny ground, and did not object to the plants which sprang up from his "easy and free" sowing. Not all persevered, however, a fact which the Sower also recognized.

Perseverance is the real issue here. There is no need to react against simple evangelistic methods, such as the "Four Spiritual Laws." The issue is not initial conversion. Rather, the issue is perseverance. Once people are brought into the faith, they need to be shepherded into maturity.

### The Four Spiritual Laws

After all, what is so terribly wrong with the "Four Spiritual Laws"? The Bible says that God created man good, and offered him a wonderful plan. That's law one, and it is exactly where the Bible begins. The Bible says that man rebelled, and came under God's wrath, and thus cannot know God's wonderful plan. That's law two, and I cannot fault it either. The Bible says that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as a substitute for us is the only way of salvation: One Way. That's law three, and who wants to question this? The Bible finally says we have to appropriate the gift of eternal life by faith in Christ, and persevere in that faith until the end. That's law four, and it is true also.

Most "four law" type booklets warn the reader not to rest on experiences. "Observe this train diagram," they read. The engine (God) pulls the train. The coal car (personal faith and trust) provides the fuel. The caboose, the most attractive car (emotional experiences) comes last. The train can run with or without the caboose. It's nice, but not necessary. So also with emotional feelings: They are nice, but not absolutely necessary. Trust in God, and let your emotions get in line as they will. Emotions need to be retrained (that's a pun, folks).

The neo-Puritan critique of "four law" evangelism generally runs along two lines. First, it is objected by some (not all) that God does not elect everybody, so we ought not say that God offers a wonderful plan to everybody. The problem with this is that puts us in God's place. Election is His business; evangelism is ours. God does offer salvation to all men, covenantally speaking.

Second, it is objected that we cannot say "God loves you" and "Christ died for you" to all men. This, however, is a linguistic error. In one sense, the full heavy theological sense, it is true that God does not love all men, and that

Christ did not die for all men; but in ordinary language, which is the level at which evangelism takes place, it certainly is true that God has a love for all men, and that the death of Christ brings benefits for all men. (For a thoroughly Reformed and Calvinistic discussion of these matters, see Norman Shepherd, "The Covenant Context for Evangelism," in John Skilton, ed., *The New Testament Student and Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976]; and the interaction on this matter in the pages of the *Banner of Truth* magazine, issues 166/167 and 170. All of this material is included in the course syllabus for Creeds and Confessions, published by Geneva Study Center, and available from them at 708 Hamvas Lane, Tyler, TX 75701. Those taking this course from the Center can order it for \$15.00, along with \$150.00 for the course. Those wishing simply to get the syllabus can obtain it for \$40.00.)

Now I once tried real, real hard to be a neo-Puritan, but try as I might, I just could not get real excited about the horrors of "four law" evangelism. It seems to me that the problem is not with the evangelism, but with the follow-up.

The problem with independent evangelistic organizations is that they tend to replace the sacramental fellowship of the Church. That, however, I do not think is something to criticize them heavily for. Let the Church get to work and do the evangelism, and we shall see the "withering away" of independent organizations. Until that time, I think most of them do good work.

(There is, clearly, a place for theological inspection of "easy believism," and there is much value in the criticisms produced by the neo-Puritans. But I have come to think that some of them at least are throwing the baby out with the bath.)

### The Sacramental System

Effective pastoral care helps people progress to maturity. Historically, the Christian Church worked out the sacramental system to assist people with the various conversions of life. While we Protestants believe in only two sacraments, it is helpful for us to look at the sacramental system, because there is some wisdom in it.

As a young person begins to approach maturity, his understanding undergoes a shift (called puberty nowadays). To harness this change, and minister the needed "stage conversion," the Church has used Confirmation. Youth are told that they now must become "soldiers of Christ." The military imagery helps them harness their new drives, and channels them toward productive things. Protestant churches which do not have Confirmation tend to have equivalent things, such as catechism classes, or teen-age youth groups. Everybody understands that this is a crisis-stage in life, and youth need help in converting through it.

Marriage is another crisis. Generally, people are so happy to get married that they do not recognize that there are going to be problems, and that some conversions are going to be needed. The old sacrament of Matrimony was designed to ask for God's special blessing on the couple getting married, and while protestants don't call it a sacrament (rightly), they do the same kind of thing.

Sickness is a crisis which generally causes people to reassess their lives—leading to what we are calling conversions (renewed faith in Christ). The sacrament of Unction was designed to provide a place for pastoral ministration in this time of need. While protestants again don't call this a sacrament, protestants do often obey James 5:15 and anoint the sick.

But how about the daily conversions, and the crises that

come from time to time, and the hidden "stage" changes that we undergo? The old Church set up the confessional to provide pastoral care for this: the sacrament of Penance. People would come to the pastor and talk over their problems in the confessional box. It is a little enough known fact, but the Protestant Reformers tried to retain the practice of confession in the Church, because they saw it as a healthy way to minister to the people (see James 5:16). Protestants generally have not worked out a good way to deal with this, but the rise of the modern counselling movement in protestant circles is an attempt to help people with the crises and needed conversions of life.

Food for thought? I think so.

Along these same lines, one protestant substitute for the confessional, in America at least, has been the rededication service. By having a week of special meetings annually, the Baptist churches provide an opportunity for persons in crisis, or who have moved to a new stage of maturity, to externalize this crisis in a ritual of rededication to Christ. Unfortunately,

the Baptist theology of conversion often comes into play here, and people tend to think that they were not "really" Christians until the day they "walked the aisle." All the same, this is another way in which the Church has provided opportunities for people to handle the crises and changes of life.

Rather than ridicule these customs (Catholic and Baptist), we Reformed Christians ought to ask whether or not there is something to be learned from them. What regular means do we provide in our churches for people to approach, *with ease*, their pastors and ask for serious counselling? Both the confession box and the rededication service provide situations wherein people can feel free to discuss their problems and change their lives. Until we have worked out something along these lines, I don't think we are really doing our jobs. Counselling cases pile up precisely because our churches do not have regular ways of handling problems before they come up.

We need to think seriously about all this.

### ***Batter My Heart***

*by John Donne*

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I like an usurped town, to another due,  
Labor to admit You, but O, to no end;  
Reason, Your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet I dearly love You, and would be loved fain,  
But am betrothed unto Your enemy.  
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again;  
Take me to You, imprison me, for I,  
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.

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