

The Reality of Conversion

One of the prominent features of the last two Presidential races in the United States of America was the issue of faith, especially that of President George W Bush and the contenders in the 2008 election. A spate of television programs featured Bush's conversion from a life of alcohol addiction and business failure to that of an evangelical believer committed to practicing his faith in the White House. News organisations and commentators claimed that the Bush administration was humming to the sound of evangelical Christian agendas, prayer meetings were taking place day and night; it was not uncommon to see White House functionaries hurrying down corridors carrying Bibles. Evangelical leaders had access to the President and influence over his agenda that were unprecedented in modern times. The content of Bush's pronouncements on issues such as international terrorism and his support of evangelically inspired reform caused some to complain that the President seemed to be getting his cues from God, not Congress. The conversion of Bush was featured strongly in a movie released in 2009 entitled, simply, "W".

Politics and partisanship aside, it was clear from Bush's profile that something fundamental had happened in his life and that it had to do with God. One day his life was headed in a particular direction, a failure in terms of his marriage, personal identity and aspirations; the next day he was reading the Bible, attending Christian study groups and speaking openly and unashamedly about his commitment to following Christ. When that happens in the lives of the wealthy and powerful, cynics often assume it is fraudulent. When it persists, serious questions emerge. When asked in a debate who had influenced him most in life he responded, "Christ. He changed my heart". Evangelicals knew exactly what he was talking about and came to believe he was genuine.

In the 2008 Presidential race, the question of religion was important because of Barak Obama's name (opponents disingenuously linked his name to that of Osama Bin Laden, which sounded remotely similar, inferring that this indicated he was really a Muslim); the fact that his Kenyan-born father had been a Muslim, and that Barak claimed (including in his 2004 book *The Audacity of Hope*) that he became a Christian as a young man. Was it a genuine conversion, they asked? Would he permit Christianity to be expressed as strongly in the White House and public policy as Bush had done?

What do we mean by "conversion"?

The most common theological term for what happened to George W Bush is "conversion". The word literally means "to turn around", or "to change direction". Engineers speak of conversion; so do advertisers, computer programmers and mathematicians. In Christian terms, conversion is what happens when someone gives their heart and life to Christ (prayerfully acknowledges His existence, sovereignty and work and embraces his authority in their life, in terms described in the Bible) and experiences radical change on the inside that alters the way they think and behave. It is possible to grow up in church, hear hundreds, or even thousands, of sermons from the world's best expositors, sing hymns and choruses with enthusiasm and serve

on church committees, without being converted, in effect without being a Biblical Christian. I have met such people.

Conversion is not always visible as a sudden event; nevertheless, when a person is converted they start to have different values, practices and lifestyles to what was previously the case. Some people become Christians as children, so the change is not climactic, not as visible, but they always know in their hearts that Christ is living there and they are functioning from relationship with him. I became a Christian as a small child, though my parent's influence, even though I do not recall the moment.

Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit. No one "converts" themselves. Human agency is about choice, making the right decision, as an act of the will and faith. But the inner change that makes a person a Christian much more. While it involves choice, is a spiritual work, a supernatural event; conversion is the work of God. It is not just a change of mind, a revised level of mental assent, although the mind is involved. The Greek word "metanoia", often translated "repentance", implies a change of mind. God does not treat us as mindless entities. I have come to believe that most people who experience God in their lives do so one step ahead of understanding intellectually what is going on.

Conversion is a miracle. That is why it often surprises people (and those around them) when it occurs. Relationship with God comes as a result of revelation. Church attendance or adherence to creeds alone will not work. It is possible to be physically close to people who know God and still not "get it". Faith and relationship with God operate on a different level, in a different realm. When faith kicks in, there is a sense that God is real, a new certainty and hope emerge, a new beginning is evident, with both power and a reason to be different. There is a sense that a new life has started.

Some people come to Christ in times of spiritual, mental, emotional, physical or relationship crises. Others do so quietly, as they calmly consider the claims of Christ and their spiritual condition, without reference to external frameworks or events. Suddenly everything makes sense, the Bible is a re-discovered book, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is tangible. Conversion is associated with an awareness of God, a desire to change, repentance from a life lived apart from Him, change and evidence of new "fruit" (behaviour and characteristics) in a person's life (Luke 3:8a).

Conversion through the ages

The Bible is replete with instances of people who were converted, whose circumstances were far removed from modern times and practices but whose underlying conditions were not very different. In the twenty-first century we have rapid communications and travel and exploding knowledge, but the underlying needs faced by every generation are the same. The needs and issues faced by men and women thousands of years ago are still with us.

In the Old Testament, we read about a spoiled young man named Moses, living in a king's palace, who came to a point in his life where he realised that a life of sin had unquestionable momentary pleasures, but did not ultimately satisfy. He turned his back on the luxury of Egypt and chose God's way

(Hebrews 11:24-27). Ruth, on the other hand, was a young Moabite widow, devastated by the early death of her husband and facing an uncertain future. In her emptiness, she adopted the faith of her mother-in-law, declaring, "Your God will be my God", moved to a new country and a completely new faith and eventually became part of the line that produced kings in Israel and Christ himself (Ruth 1:16).

Manasseh was an evil king, one of the worst produced by the nation of Judah. He sacrificed his children to a god called Molloch, tore down worship of the One True God, introduced some of the most foul practices in the country's history and was ultimately judged and taken as a prisoner to Babylon. There, at the nadir of his life, he came to himself and turned back to God. Given a second chance, he returned to Jerusalem and cleansed the land of evil. The entire nation returned to faith in God (2 Chronicles 33). Few national leaders have had such an impact.

Many people who met Christ were converted. Sworn enemies such as the stooge tax collector Matthew and Simon the Zealot, a member of an underground movement dedicated to hunting down and assassinating those who worked with the Roman overlords (particularly quisling tax collectors) became close friends and disciples of Jesus and worked alongside one another, presenting an alternative to corruption and terrorism.

Then there is the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well of Sychar (John 4:1-42). Initially reliant on compliance with external religious forms and asserted ethnic superiority to put her right with God she discovered that Jesus was the Messiah and proclaimed him to her entire village.

Luke tells us of Zacchaeus, who climbed a tree out of curiosity, to see who Jesus was, and went home so changed in his attitudes toward people, power and possessions (Luke 19:1-10) that his friends and neighbours barely recognised him. Another example is the thief who was crucified beside Jesus. Hanging on a cross, paying the ultimate penalty for a life of crime, he called on Christ to save him and was assured of a place in Paradise (Luke 23:40-43). A "death-bed conversion" to be sure, but no less a work of God for the circumstances in which it occurred. Conversion is still a decision. The other thief chose to reject Christ.

The New Testament Book of Acts tells the story of three thousand people converted to Christ on the Day of Pentecost. As the disciples prayed, the Holy Spirit came down, thousands of lives were changed and the first church was born (Acts 2:41). Filled with the Holy Spirit Peter played a key role in the conversion of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, together with his entire household (Acts 10).

The writer of Acts records the part played by Philip, an Evangelist, in the conversions of an occult practitioner named Simon in Samaria (Acts 8:9-24) and an official in the royal court of Queen Candace of Ethiopia (Acts 8:26-39), whose faith inspired the birth of a church that has survived in Ethiopia for nearly two thousand years. An old Ethiopian priest I met in Jerusalem glowed with excitement as he insisted that his church had been planted by the same official. Imagine, a whole community touched as a result of a single conversion.

The New Testament is full of miraculous stories of conversion. The stand-out example is the religious bigot Saul, who persecuted Christians, violently tracking them down and jailing and torturing them as heretics. I once visited a monument to Paul in a grotto at the rear of a monastery in Damascus (for the full account read Acts 9:1-31; 22:1-16; 26:12-18). The young Syrian priest assured me that this was “*the place*” where Saul met Jesus. Who knows? A few kilometres away, near Bab Touma, or Thomas Gate, just off the Madhat Basha (otherwise known as Strait Street, because it is very long and quite straight), another grotto celebrated the meeting of the young Christian Saul and a brave man named Ananias, who started the work of discipling him.

The priest who showed me around guaranteed that this was “the very house of Ananias”. Who could be sure? There were no other contenders. A short walk away, overlooking one of the main thoroughfares of the city, was a gate, with a tower built into it. The person in charge explained to me that this was the place where Saul was lowered from the city wall in a basket, in order to escape his persecutors. A nearby statue commemorates the event. Whether or not the sites are reliable, the contribution made by this remarkable man to the history of Christianity is unmistakable. The account of the conversion of Saul, who thereafter in Scripture is known by his Greek name Paul, is one of the most compelling in the Bible.

If you visit the city of Tarsus today, you will be shown a gate where Cleopatra and Mark Anthony met in 41 BC. However, Tarsus is better remembered as the Cilician home town of Paul and the commercial centre where he grew up with a notion that the world was a big place, a paradigm that inspired him to take the Christian message outside of the confines of Judaism and proclaim Christ to the entire empire. Religion did not save Paul; Christ did. Not pious observance of ritual, but the dynamics of a relationship with God himself. Conversion was the trigger. The Holy Spirit was the principal actor.

The power of Christ to change people became the centre-point of Paul’s ministry, as he and his companions embarked on one missionary journey after another. The writer of Acts records his involvement in the conversion of a Philippian businesswoman Lydia (the first Christian convert in Europe) and her friends (Acts 16:11-15); a jailer and his family (Acts 16:29-32), influential people in cities such as Corinth, Ephesus, Athens and all over the then-known world. The message of the fledgling Christian faith was predicated not on new ideas (cf Acts 17:19-21) but the power of God to transform lives.

One of the most beautiful stories of conversion in the New Testament is the account of the privileged but immature son of a businessman, who rebelled in his youth against the constraints of family life and societal expectations, engaged in moral depravity that ruined him financially (and nearly physically) and ultimately returned, bankrupt, to his forgiving father (Luke 15:11-32). Like many young people, he reached a point in his life where he thought he had all the answers. He didn’t like life down on the farm. The lure of city life and the promise of more sophisticated friends dominated his thinking. At the first opportunity, he struck out on his own.

For a while life was good. He had experiences and feelings he had never previously imagined possible. He had enough money to do what he liked.

Independence was a great feeling. Then the money ran out and he became jaded. Friends vanished, one by one, and he discovered that “a man’s life does not consist of the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15). Instead of complacency and independence, he was gnawed by feelings of loneliness and failure. Forced to earn a little money as a day labourer in a pig sty (pigs were regarded as unclean to Jews and contact with them a thing of disgust) the Bible says “he came to himself”. The penny dropped. Suddenly he realised what was going on, and he didn’t like what he saw. As far as he was concerned, he had “blown it” for life. Fortunately, his father had a more redemptive perspective and welcomed him back home.

Rubens and Rembrandt both painted the return of the prodigal son, but the messages are different. In Ruben’s work, the wayward son appears still to be negotiating the way home. Rembrandt’s work is more accurate, depicting for us the tenderness of the father toward the young man, whose conversion from a life of sin is unmistakable. Conversion is not about terms, it is about surrender to Christ’s Lordship.

The importance of personal decision

An essential part of conversion is recognising that we do not have what it takes to change, but that we can play a pivotal role and make the decision to do so. The rest is up to God. “Therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has gone. The new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Christian is actually a brand new person, not the old personality drawing on its resources and trying hard to be different. (Self-help in such matters is usually doomed to disappointment; peel away the layer and you will see that the same corrupt person inhabits the old skin.) God says, “I make all things new”. Conversion is a *sine qua non*, an indispensable requirement, of the Christian life. To the religious paragons of his day Jesus said, “Unless you are converted, and become like little children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 18:3).

When conversion is the work of Christ and the grace of God, instead of the result of our efforts, there is an underlying certainty that is bigger than our human capacities. A new hope is engendered. There is a new sense that things in life hang together, that they fit into an eternal purpose. We used to sing a chorus, “Things are different now. Something happened to me, since I gave my heart to Jesus”. He gives us power to live and act differently, to relate to other people in a new way. Only Christ makes this possible.

There is no life that God cannot change, no habit that he can’t break. Nothing is impossible to Him. Our faith is boosted every time we see people set free from guilt and hang-ups, difficult relationships improved, forgiveness extended for past hurts, people about whom it is said that they are “hopeless cases” made new.

As essential part of being relevant Christians in today’s world is to proclaim the endless power of a changeless God to revolutionise men and women with the power and promise of an abundant life.