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Discussion starters offered by the National Working Group on Doctrine

Worksheet 10: Conversion

A World of Conversions

Our opinions and belief systems are dependent on, shaped by, and formed by the “war of persuasions” (David Bentley Hart). Rules, customs, habits are learned, taught to us by the “social constructs of reality”. What this tells us is that people are being “converted,” being persuaded, being changed all the time, whether by politics, TV commercials or some other form of knowledge shaping. It is for this reason that the sociologist Peter Berger refers to our time as “an age of conversion” (Berger). Acknowledged or not, every one of us lives in a world of contested formations where “conversions” occur all the time.



The Church and Conversion Aversion

Across many Christian denominations today the topic of “conversion” is a contentious issue. Given the push of postmodernism, the reality of our multi-faith world, and bad experiences, scores within mainline churches are suffering from “conversion aversion.” Respect for other people’s belief systems, and a rejection of intolerance, have led many to become suspicious of wanting to convert others for fear of being predatory.

Throughout the New Testament, the church is constantly called to the conversional task. It is mandated to “proclaim” (kêrussein), to “tell good news” (euaggelizesthai), and to “bear witness” (marturein). This N T intention is that for those who come under the good news of the gospel there should be a definite and acknowledged faith in Jesus Christ as lord. The N T emphasis on evangelism, and, the current conversion aversion, mean that the subject of “conversion” merits the critical, focused attention of all Christians.

“IT IS ONE THING TO CALL MEN AND WOMEN TO COMMITMENT; IT IS ANOTHER TO SEE THEM GROUNDED ENOUGH IN THE FAITH SO THAT THEY ARE FUNCTIONING AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS. THE OUTCOME OF REPENTANCE AND FAITH IS MEANT TO BE DISCIPLESHIP.”

- RICHARD PEACE, CONVERSION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, PP. 253, 304



Note

This sheet is part of a series on theology in the 21st century. It is prepared for the National Assembly by the Working Group on Doctrine as a discussion starter for small groups, in congregations, faith communities or other settings. It may also be used for personal reflection. Low resolution copies of this sheet can be downloaded free of charge from the Doctrine website: www.assembly.uca.org.au/doctrine.

Questions

What is your experience of conversion? Was it a single event or an ongoing process within the church community?

Is conversion (as an event or a process) an essential part of the Christian life? If so, why is a vibrant conversional theology important to the life of the church?

Why is “Conversion Aversion” so prevalent in the life of the church? How can this issue be addressed?

How is Christian nurture and formation related to the call to repentance and conversion?

In the Christian life, in what ways are personal and political conversion related?

Books to Read

Richard Peace, Conversion in the New Testament

Walter Conn, Christian Conversion

Beverly Gaventa, From Darkness to Light

John Wesley, “The New Birth,” in The Works of John Wesley, A. Outler (ed.)

Gordon Smith, Transforming Conversion,

N T Wright, After You Believe

Conversion Biblically

The term conversion is seldom used in the Bible, appearing only once in noun form in the NT (Acts 15: 3). Although the word is not often used, the imagery of conversion, of repentance, is common to both the OT and NT. The basic meaning of conversion in Scripture is “turning”; a turning away from sin, a U-turn of the heart - a radical metanoia - from “self-centredness” (Barth) to a believing obedience. It involves a complete surrendering on the part of the believer to Jesus’ lordship over the totality of life. Theologically, it is essential to the central message of Jesus (Mk 1: 15; 2: 14), and is a fundamental element in the ongoing process of Christian discipleship. Examples of the concept in the NT are: Zacchaeus (Lk 19: 2-10), the woman at the well (Jn 4: 1-30), Paul (Acts 9: 1-22), the jailer at Philippi (Acts 16: 27-34), and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 26-40).

Conversion is, and has been from the beginning foundational to the Christian way of life. All the biblical symbols of the divine-human encounter that narrate how a person enters the community of Christ make this clear.

Quotes

“When the falsely innocent Christlike figure of pure suffering and sacrifice for our sake tells us: ‘I don’t want anything from you!’ we can be sure that this statement conceals a qualification ‘... except your very soul.’” Slavoj Zizek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, p. 170

“A church that does not believe in personal conversion, and is not given to conversional theology, and yet which seeks to promote justice against injustice in society, is ignorant of how truth-claims work in the world. It is a church that needs to be mugged by reality, because it is confused, and seriously in need of a return to biblical theology.” Felix Sattmann, *Discipleship Church*, p. 98



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What is conversion?

For those forgiven in Christ, the living out of the conversion experience does have real and meaningful societal consequences. It involves the convert in the redemptive processes of God, in choosing to work for freedom, justice and nonviolence, against the dominance of militarism, racism, sexism and exploitation (Soelle). Christian conversion is not just some private mystical experience. Nor is it just some other way to make society ethically better or a more just place in which to live.

Even so, conversion is much more than this. Personal conversion, either in a moment in time, or in an extended process, is about a choice between competing histories. A choice between my old history, or God’s new history in the life of the believer through the reconciling and saving work of Jesus’ death and resurrection (cf., 2 Cor. 5: 17). Coming to Christ through dramatic conversion, or nurtured conversion involves each person in an “upheaval of being” (Durkheim).

It brings about a discernable change in our personal compass, leading to a different private and political outlook; to a different life-orientation towards God, the world and neighbours (Gutiérrez). Conversion, which goes beyond a one-off decision to an ongoing process of discipleship, is the proper end towards which the work of evangelism and Christian formation lead.

The Work of the Triune God

Conversion is closely tied to baptism and is enabled by ecclesial proclamation and community. The word of grace can come in many ways. Nevertheless, conversion is the mysterious work of God. While conversion is related to evangelism and mission, it is not the result of techniques that restrict God’s grace to coercive patterns of response. Nor can conversion be fully explained by developmental theories; it is a new birth (John 3). It is the work of the Holy Spirit who is the converting agent (2 Cor 3: 18). Conversion is not what we do of ourselves, it is the work of the triune God who reaches out to us and turns us towards Christ in faith and repentance. It is what God does, and is therefore miraculous (Newbigin).

Conversion and Renewal

Because conversion is central to authentic Christian experience, and transformative of both our personal and public selves, the question confronting us is: “How can the church of the crucified and risen One be non-conversional in a violent and unjust, materialistic and individualistic, time like ours?” Beyond the jaded techniques of religious consumerism, there is a way open for the renewal of the church. It is through a renewed understanding and implementation of the theology of conversion. By establishing a new vantage point concerning the place and consequences of conversion in our post-Christian culture, a way is opened up for individuals and congregations to explore creative methods of winning people to the lordship of Jesus and heralding the peaceable reign of God in the world.

