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Some Theological Problems in relation to Religious Conversion

BY OWEN BRANDON

I SUBMIT this article as a prolegomenon to further inquiry, and therefore beg leave to raise questions without attempting adequately to answer them. Elsewhere I have recently suggested that more consideration should be given to certain aspects of evangelism and conversion in the light of present-day knowledge and needs. Therefore, when the Editor invited me to write an article on Conversion, I took the liberty to ask permission to raise these questions in the hope that they would call forth a response from others who might be able to contribute to their elucidation, and because I felt that *The Churchman* would be the ideal organ for their discussion.

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The first question is, of course : *What do we mean by conversion?* During the last ten years a whole new body of literature has grown up on the subject of Conversion, and from a careful perusal of the literature it is evident that a variety of meanings are attached to the term. I personally have tested numerous individuals and groups of Christians, asking them to define conversion or to express what they understand by the term ; and have received replies ranging from such ideas as the first groping or turning of the soul toward God, to something like complete sanctification ! Canon F. W. B. Bullock in a recent work¹ has noted the same thing. Discussing the meaning of conversion, he says : " But ' religious conversion ', without any further definition or limitation, may mean many different things. In the broadest sense, it may mean some kind of a change, no matter of what nature, in a person's religious experience ; in the narrowest sense, it may mean a religious change of a particular kind, accomplished in a particular way by methods so stereotyped that an almost automatic result is secured ; or, of course, the phrase can mean anything between these two extremes." Incidentally, Dr. Bullock's is a definitive work, extremely well documented, and covering all the major literature of the subject. The serious student of the future will be grateful to Dr. Bullock for so much material within the compass of a single volume.

Now, until those who are engaged in evangelism are more agreed as to what conversion is, there is sure to be confusion, and confusion of a serious nature. When " converts " lapse and the question of the cause of their lapse is raised, usually one of a number of ingenious answers is given. Sometimes a distinction is made between psychological and spiritual conversion, and the lapsed are said to have been psychologically but not spiritually converted. Such an answer, however, shows a lack of psychological insight ; for if a person is truly psychologically converted, he would not easily lapse. In which case, who is to tell whether those converts who " stand " are psychologically or spiritually converted ? Sometimes the answer is given that

the lapsed were converted but not regenerated; and in this case conversion is said to be the human act and regeneration the work of the Holy Spirit. But then we might ask on what ground this distinction is made. Why call for decisions if we cannot be certain that the Holy Spirit is moving in the hearts of our hearers? And what becomes of the evangelist's confidence in his own oft-repeated text, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out"?³ If he should answer that the first part of the verse covers the contingency, then it might be argued that, by implication, that same part of the verse condemns his (the evangelist's) pressing for decisions. If the work of conversion is entirely God's, what right has the evangelist to press for decisions? Another answer that is sometimes given is that the "convert" made a profession but was never converted. But, surely, that is just begging the question.

In recent campaigns, no doubt due largely to the influence of the Billy Graham crusades and of modern American pastoral language generally, those who come forward are referred to as "inquirers" rather than as "converts", and they are "counselled" rather than "converted". This is, no doubt, all to the good, but it does not help very much. The new language is, in reality, only a reflection of the problem; it is not a solution. It only tends to emphasize the fact that the problem of definition is still acute, for there are many grades of "inquirers" and many forms of "counselling" are called for if their needs are really to be met.

Ultimately, this all boils down to the simple question: *Can we satisfactorily define religious conversion?* I wonder whether we can, except in the broadest of terms. Go through the literature, or discuss the matter with individuals of differing ecclesiastical traditions, and note the number of different definitions or descriptions that are possible. In this connection I would recommend the reading of Dr. Erik Routley's book *The Gift of Conversion*³. He shows how that there has grown up a "mythology of conversion", a hypothetical pattern of events in the religious life, built (so it is thought) on the well-known and authentic stories "which everybody knows either by acquaintance with the sources or by hearsay". Pre-eminent among these are the experiences of St. Paul, St. Augustine, and John Wesley. Dr. Routley says: "There is a widespread tendency in those who seek conversion and in those who have achieved it to assimilate their desire or their experience to the archetypes, or to their understanding of them. This is where, not infrequently, mischief has been done. It is not unknown for preachers to preach towards a conversion conceived on the pattern popularly ascribed to the conversions of Paul, Augustine, or Wesley, nor is it uncommon for seekers to expect conversion on that pattern. The pattern thus offered or sought need not be—normally is not—the historic pattern which those conversions actually followed: it is rather the pattern ascribed to them by traditional belief."⁴ And he goes on to say: "We must now lay stress on the fact that each of these three classic conversions is *sui generis* and not at any point to be subsumed under any categories that will do for either of its neighbours. All they have in common is that they are a turning to the Christian

Way. But in all other matters they differ *toto caelo*. Paul turns from persecuting the Way. Augustine turns from insulting it. Wesley turns from following it blindfold. Paul is a man of learning ; Augustine a cultivated man of licence ; Wesley a man of piety. Paul, converted, becomes an apostle ; Augustine, converted, becomes a bishop and man of letters (in some respects, not the best of bishops) ; Wesley, converted, becomes a missionary to his home country. You cannot even use the three great stories to clericalize conversion ; only Augustine of the three becomes anything essentially like a professional minister of the Gospel."* It seems evident that conversion means different things to different people in different circumstances and in different states of need, and that a broader understanding of the subject is necessary in the face of modern needs.

* * * *

Our next question is : *What is the Gospel?* The situation in Manchester over next year's proposed Billy Graham crusade* should give Christian leaders food for serious thought. It raises the question : What is the Gospel? When the Committee of the Manchester and Salford Council of Churches was asked whether it would consider issuing the invitation to Dr. Graham, as a body representing wide Christian interests in the city, the Committee decided that it could do so only on condition that Dr. Graham be asked to share the main ministry of the campaign with men the Committee would like to nominate, the names of Dr. Donald Soper, Father Trevor Huddleston, and Dr. George Macleod being specifically mentioned. It was thought that such men would balance the ministry of the crusade by showing the relevance of the Gospel to the contemporary social situation. The spokesmen for Dr. Graham, however, replied that, although they realized the need for such an emphasis and recognized the competence of the Christian leaders named, they felt, nevertheless, that they ought not to depart from their principle and practice of having Dr. Graham as the sole preacher at the main rally meetings.

Now, quite apart from other considerations—and there probably are others—we have here a clash of opinions as to what the Gospel really is. The Committee of the Council of Churches obviously felt that the message of the campaign ought to be directed to the total life of men ; Dr. Graham's representatives felt that Christianity has something to say to man's total life but that that is not the Gospel. A crucial question, therefore, arises. Put into theological terms, we may ask : What are the doctrines involved in the message of evangelism? The simplest answer, I suppose, is that the evangelistic message concerns man's sin and God's work of redemption : it involves the doctrines of Man, Sin, and Grace. That sounds simple enough, but is it adequate? The moment we introduced the concept of *sin* we are faced, in this modern age, with the whole problem of morality ; and this is something which we just cannot escape. Now it seems to me that we need to adopt a two-fold attitude to this problem of morality (and I am thinking here, not only in terms of evangelism, but also in the wider setting of Christian duty) : (1) We must take cognizance of all that modern psychology tells us about guilt-consciousness. There are " sinners " who need to be treated as sick persons ; but

(2) we must not allow science to have the last word in the matter of moral judgments. There is in our modern world a very real and important place for Ethics. I think that Dr. J. A. Hadfield's distinction between Sin and Moral Disease⁷ is relevant here, and that there is, as he says, a place for the concept of sin in psychology.

But, having said this at (2), I think that the statement needs to be qualified, or, at least, clarified. The New Testament and common experience would seem to show that there are at least three aspects of sin : (i) Godward ; (ii) Manward ; (iii) Selfward. We might distinguish them by the terms theological social, and psychological. And we might well ask : Are not all these aspects of sin equally important ? And is not man equally in need of reconciliation at all these three levels ? Theologians have tended to think, perhaps, mainly, though not exclusively, of the Godward aspect ; sociologists of the manward aspect ; and psychologists of the personal or selfward aspect. But modern man needs to learn the way of reconciliation in all aspects of his need ; and it seems reasonable to suggest that this cannot be done either by parsons or by sociologists or by psychologists working in isolation in a restricted area of man's total experience of life. What we need is a much wider and much fuller view of man and his needs ; and this, I think, might bring us back to a more Biblical view of man. And preaching based on such a view, expressed in terms which modern man can understand, would give the impression of being more scientific, more relevant, and more practical than the preaching of so many, both in the past and at the present time, which appears to be based on a deficient theology because lacking in sociological and psychological perspectives. Theology, sociology, and psychology are not three separate, isolated disciplines applicable to three different groups of professional practitioners ; surely, today we must see them as three aspects of one great body of knowledge available to pastors and to educators, to sociologists and to psychologists, and, indeed, to all who are engaged in the service of modern man.

Now, if this is true, or if it approximates in any degree to truth, then it has an inevitable bearing on evangelism ; and the question it raises is : Does the evangelist who preaches only (or mainly) the Godward aspect of sin *lose* something by his neglect (or partial neglect) of its sociological and psychological implications ; or does he *gain* something by simplifying the matter in calling the individual to repentance ? My feeling is that the loss is greater than the gain. To quote a saying of Canon Guy King years ago (though, admittedly out of its context, for Canon King was speaking in another connection) : Can a man adequately answer the question, "Where art thou ?" (Gen. iii. 9) without facing the challenge of the question, "Where is thy brother ?" (Gen. iv. 9) ?

We might almost ask : What is the purpose of modern evangelism ? But this question has been adequately discussed by Douglas Webster in his book, *What is Evangelism ?*⁸ and by Alan Walker in *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World*.⁹ All one can do here is to ask the question : Can modern man possibly understand the doctrines of Sin and Grace if he is not also shown the Godward, manward, and selfward aspects of his own fundamental need ?

* * * *

A question which has cropped up several times recently is : *Can there be any true conversion without a prior conviction of sin?* Renewed interest in recent years in the great religious revivals of the past has helped to underline the question. It is sometimes said that the greatest need of our age is a real conviction of sin, that in the past men, women, and children were brought under deep conviction of sin when the Gospel was preached, and that until our generation experiences such conviction we shall not see true revival.

Now, of course, it is true that deep conviction of sin was experienced by multitudes in the 17th and 18th century revivals, but that was because their minds had been conditioned to feel such conviction by generations of preachers. It was the noticing of this fact that led Dr William Sargant to study the subject of conversion and which led to his (to many people) devastating book, *Battle for the Mind*.¹⁰ But let us illustrate the matter, first by reference to hymns, for so often hymns influence the mind of the worshipper in ways he little realizes, and then by direct reference to the literature of revival.

In one of his books, Dr. G. A. Coe¹¹ quotes a hymn from a collection of "Hymns for Sunday Schools, Youth and Children" published in 1852, which runs :

" There is beyond the sky
A heaven of joy and love :
And holy children, when they die,
Go to that world above.

" There is a dreadful hell,
And everlasting pains ;
There sinners must with devils dwell,
In darkness, fire, and chains.

" Can such a child as I
Escape this awful end ?
And may I hope, whene'er I die,
I shall to heaven ascend ?

" Then will I read and pray,
While I have life and breath ;
Lest I should be cut off today,
And sent t' eternal death."

Dr. Coe was, of course, writing about America. How far this particular collection of hymns was used in American Sunday Schools one is unable to say ; but if this hymn is in any way typical of the hymns used with children at that time, no wonder they felt intense guilt-consciousness. Some of the hymns used in English Sunday Schools about that time, and even up to recent times in some Sunday Schools in England are not very different. H. A. L. Jefferson,¹² writing on this point, remarks that when modern English hymn books are compared with those in use half a century ago, the most striking changes are those in the section devoted to children's hymns. He says : " When we look at the older hymns it is well nigh beyond belief that some of

the sentiments and dogmas expressed could have been imposed on children." And then he quotes a children's hymn from Isaac Watts, beginning :

" What if the Lord grow wroth, and swear,
While I refuse to read and pray,
That He'll refuse to lend an ear
To all my groans another day ? "

and ending with :

" 'Tis dangerous to provoke a God !
His power and vengeance none can tell :
One stroke of His almighty rod
Shall send young sinners quick to hell."

Perhaps these are extreme examples, indeed, it is to be hoped that they are. Certainly, I quote them as extreme. Nevertheless, it remains true, even to this day, that the main emphasis in many of our most popular hymns is on the twin themes of sin and redemption. This became evident in a questionnaire which I circulated amongst representative bodies of Christian folk.

That there was a strong emphasis on sin and judgment as a preliminary to the offering of the Gospel, both in America and on this side of the Atlantic, during the great periods of revival, is a matter of history, and is a commonplace to anyone who is familiar with the literature of the times ; but, to make the point even more strongly, I venture to quote further. This time from the great evangelist, Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875). On the need for self-examination and confession of sin, he wrote : " Self-examination consists in looking at your lives, in considering your actions, in calling up the past, and learning its true character. Look back over your past history. Take up your individual sins one by one, and look at them. I do not mean that you should just cast a glance at your past life, and see that it has been full of sins, and then go to God and make a sort of general confession, and ask for pardon. That is not the way. You must take them one by one. It will be a good thing to take pen and paper, as you go over them, and write them down as they occur to you. Go over them as carefully as a merchant goes over his books ; and as often as a sin comes before your memory, add it to the list. General confessions will never do. Your sins were committed *one by one* ; and as far as you can come at them, they ought to be reviewed and repented of one by one. Now begin, and take up first what are commonly, but *improperly*, called Sins of Omission."¹¹

Sargant¹⁴ quotes from the same source. He says : " Finney insisted that the revivalist should never relax the mental pressure on a prospective convert ", and then quotes from Finney's *Lectures on Revival*, thus : " One of the ways in which people give false comfort to distressed sinners is by asking them : ' What have you done ? You are not so bad. . . . ' When the truth is, they have been a great deal worse than they think they have. No sinner ever had an idea that his sins were greater than they are. No sinner ever had an adequate idea of how great a sinner he is. It is not probable that any man could live under the full sight of his sins. God has, in mercy, spared all his

creatures on earth that worst of sights, a naked human heart. The sinner's guilt is much more deep and damning than he thinks, and his danger is much greater than he thinks it is ; and if he could see them as they are probably he would not live one moment."

Sargant comments : " Once the sense of guilt has been implanted, Finney knew that, to clinch the matter, no concessions of any sort could be made."

Another passage from Finney, quoted by Sargant, is relevant to our discussion. Finney declared : " Protracted seasons of conviction are generally owing to defective instruction. Wherever clear and faithful instructions are given to sinners, there you will generally find the convictions are *deep* and *pungent*, but short. . . . Where sinners are deceived by false views, they may be kept along for weeks, and perhaps months, and sometimes years, in a languishing state, and at last, perhaps, be crowded into the kingdom and saved. But where the truth is made perfectly clear to the sinner's mind, if he does not soon submit, his case is hopeless."

Finney saw the importance of the conditioning process. He had no illusions about it. Indeed, his whole thesis is that where revival is sedulously prepared for, it will surely come. And these are not isolated quotations. They could be reduplicated from writers on both sides of the Atlantic. They reflect a widespread mental outlook throughout Evangelical Christendom at that time. No wonder the feeling of conviction of sin was common amongst those who came under the ministry of these great preachers.

James Burns, in his treatise on Revival,¹¹ states that " every revival movement seeks an awakening in the individual and in the Church of a deep sense of sin ". And he adds : " In the intense spiritual light, the sin and guilt of the awakened soul stand out in terrifying blackness. Not only are the cardinal sins laid bare in all their hideousness, but the convicted see themselves as in a mirror ; they see themselves as God sees them ; every fault, every meanness, every deviation from the truth, every act of self-interest, of betrayal, of hypocrisy, confronts them ; their sins drag them to judgment ; they cry out in their despair ; an awful terror seizes them ; under the pressure of the Spirit they often fall to the ground with loud cries and tears, the conviction of sin burns them like fire. Yet this ' terror of the Lord ', remarkable though it may seem, is not the terror of punishment ; it is inspired by a sense of having rebelled against the divine love, of having failed to give glory to God, of having crucified Christ afresh. This is the sin which, above all others, gives to the awakened soul at such times its most poignant bitterness. Under the pressure of this agony of conviction, men openly confess their sins. They go through the long and terrible catalogue, hiding nothing ; their one intense longing is to cast their sins for ever from them, and to be brought into reconciliation and be at peace with God."

My own studies have shown that those who are nurtured in an evangelical atmosphere and/or who come under the influence of evangelical preaching and teaching, often do experience a conviction of sin even today. But the question I would raise here is : Is this conviction of sin essential to real conversion ? Or is it the concomitant of a

certain kind of teaching? Whatever answer we give to these questions, those who long for a return to the days when men, women, and children sought God in an agony of conviction, must not forget that that response was called forth from the hearers by an element of exposition that has been lacking in Christian preaching in recent years. Can we expect that response without the long process of conditioning? Do we need to stir up that response? Is it a necessary part of real conversion? Or is another response-pattern adequate and more appropriate for today?

* * * *

Another question, closely related to the one just mentioned, is that concerning *the inducement of fear*. Fear is often a concomitant of conversion. Both in the history of revivals and in the experience of individuals, fear is sometimes associated with guilt consciousness, and sometimes with an anxiety state arising from social unrest and/or uncertainty. I give but one example:

The Revival in Kilsyth, in Scotland, in the early part of last century, gave rise to a volume of *Lectures on Revival*¹⁸ by a group of Ministers of the Church of Scotland, published in 1840. In the Preface the authors define a revival of religion as "an unusual manifestation of the power of the grace of God in convincing and converting careless sinners, and in quickening and increasing the faith and piety of believers". And this manifestation is seen against the background of social unrest and widespread fear. They say: "Still there is one topic to which we must, however, briefly advert. The state and aspect of the times, fraught with the elements of peril and commotion, give a feeling of importance to the subject of revivals of religion which it might otherwise not have been thought to possess. The *reality* of the importance indeed cannot be increased, but men's *perception* of it may; and the condition of our country, and of the world, is such, that all men anticipate a period near at hand, marked by mighty events, and productive of changes of incalculable potency for evil or for good. Never, probably, were such mighty agencies at once in such a state of restless and conflicting action. It seems as if some universal convulsion were on the point of bursting forth, to wrench and shake asunder the entire fabric of society throughout the world, and to cast the shattered fragments into the boiling vortex of confusion, that they may be utterly broken to pieces, fused, and blended together, preparatory to the formation of a completely new order of things out of the dissevered and chaotic ruins. No principles or laws, civil or political, seem to have any power to avert the dire convulsion. All who think deeply on the subject are alike persuaded, that none but an Almighty hand can check the progress of the demoralizing and dissociating principles which are at present working with such fearful energy in the very heart of the community. In the midst of these portentous omens, nothing could reassure and calm our minds but the cheering hope, the heart-confirming belief, that God had not utterly forsaken us. And nothing could have given us this assurance of hope, but some unusual manifestation of His gracious presence, such as He has been pleased to grant by 'reviving His work in the midst of the years, and in wrath remembering mercy'."

I quote this in full, for it is so much like the kind of preaching one hears so often today. In fact, I gave this quotation, in typescript, to a friend of mine to read, and he thought it to be a diagnosis of the contemporary situation by a present-day preacher! Its date, of course, is 1840.

It is all too easy to engender fear in some minds. Today we seldom, if ever, hear the terrors of hell preached in evangelism, though we do hear of souls "going to a lost (or to a Christless) eternity". What we hear more about today are the perils that await civilization, and the threat of nuclear war. These are the terrors which some evangelists use today as the background against which to proclaim the Gospel; and the question must surely be raised: Is it necessary, or right, that this should be the case? Sometimes the appeal to fear on the part of the evangelist leads individuals to seek the comforts, security, and consolations of religion; but sometimes it has the opposite effect, and creates feelings of repulsion. A few years ago an old lady who lived alone went to an evangelistic service where the film "God and the Atom" was being shown. It frightened her. She came away perplexed, and said to her vicar afterwards, "I didn't realize that our God could be so cruel as to create such things." Poor old soul! Perhaps she was wiser than the enthusiastic young evangelist who used the terrors of the atom to appeal for conversions. Anyway, in her case the appeal misfired. And I could quote examples of other persons who have been turned away from religion by this kind of approach. My questions here are: Is the evangelist right in making an appeal to fear as a basis for Gospel preaching? And: Is it ever right to induce fear, or to attempt to induce fear, in order to produce conversion?

* * * *

Here, then, are the questions. I apologize for the personal note that has been introduced so frequently into this article; but these matters are my great concern at the moment, and I seek the help of others in arriving at satisfactory answers to the questions raised. It will be both helpful and gratifying to learn the views of others who have something to contribute to the discussion.

¹ *Evangelical Conversion in Great Britain, 1696-1845*, by F. W. B. Bullock 1960.

² John vi. 37.

³ *The Gift of Conversion*, by Erik Routley, 1957.

⁴ *The Gift of Conversion*, p. 16.

⁵ *The Gift of Conversion*, p. 26.

⁶ As reported in *The Church of England Newspaper*, April 8, 1960.

⁷ *Psychology and Morals*, by J. A. Hadfield, 13th editn., 1944.

⁸ *What is Evangelism?* by Douglas Webster, 1959.

⁹ *The Whole Gospel for the Whole World*, by Alan Walker, 1958.

¹⁰ *Battle for the Mind*, by William Sargant, 1957.

¹¹ *Education in Religion and Morals*, by George A. Coe, 1904.

¹² *Hymns in Christian Worship*, by H. A. L. Jefferson, 1950.

¹³ *Finney on Revivals: Selected Lectures*, by William Henry Harding, Revised Edition, p. 52.

¹⁴ *Battle for the Mind*, pp. 142-143.

¹⁵ *Revivals, the Laws and their Leaders*, by James Burns, 1909, pp. 20-21.

¹⁶ *Lectures on the Revival of Religion*, by Ministers of the Church of Scotland, 1840.