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Author: R. Drayton

Author Address: ddrayton@csu.edu.au

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Abstract: For the first 1700 years of the church's life a person became a Christian through baptism. It is only in the last two hundred years that evangelism created an alternative understanding that it was by conversion that a person became a Christian. Conversion focuses on the individual relationship between God and the believer, thereby internalising the Christian experience. The results of New Testament scholarship however focus on the importance of the person entering into the Kingdom of God in which they become part of the church, caught up in God's mission to the world, involved with the issues of others as well as the personal, the sustainability of the creation as much as a call for justice. This Greening of Evangelism flows from the emphasis on the purposes of God rather than a focus on the needs of the individual.

The Greening of Evangelism.

The Inaugural Lecture for 2007, United Theological College, Rev Dr Dean Drayton

Why the greening of evangelism?

For the first 1700 years of the Church's life a person became a Christian by being baptized. It is only in the last two hundred years that evangelism has provided another option for Protestants in which a person may also become a Christian by their individual decision to be a Christian.

This evangelistic approach is well known in the public mind through TV and movies. It is the call for an individual to confess their sins and commit their life to Jesus Christ to receive the forgiveness of God. The image is well known. God is on one side of a chasm and I am on the other; the cross of Christ is the bridge enabling me to walk across the chasm my sins have caused. This is a 'God and me' portrayal of redemption.

In the last half of the twentieth century there has been a growing realization that each individual is part of a larger picture, interrelated with others and interdependent with the creation. If this is true, we need an evangelism that goes beyond 'God and me' to include others and creation, instead of being independent of them.

Yet there are other issues to do with evangelism. The message of the Christian Church has had a powerful effect upon billions of individuals and many different cultures and societies. In the last half of the twentieth century in the West the churches have found themselves edged out of society, their contribution critiqued, and their efforts to recruit new members seemingly less effective than in the past. It is as if the call to become Christian has lost the power to transform lives and influence the culture of Western society. Has there been a lessening in the experience of the reality of God and the reality of this experience to transform individuals? Clearly something has happened in the West in the last fifty years which requires us to have a close look at these two basic ways in which people become Christians.

Any attempt to give an overview of the process of becoming a Christian in one article has to focus on particular moments of a vast story, as well as be aware this process leads into a terminological minefield. First, the perspective presented is predominantly a Protestant perspective, focusing on the early church, apostolic times, Christendom and then the effects of the Enlightenment and implications for the present time. A complex story is told in terms of the key events, persons and practices seen to be critical. Secondly, over time, words are invented, meanings change and new practices emerge. In researching the paper it became clear that the most comprehensive term available for to describe the issues involved with baptism and evangelism is that of 'conversion'. Conversion provides a way of describing a process of personal and social change, a resocialisation that has a beginning and an end. Conversion, however, can differ from one historical period to another, vary in terms of what is involved in baptism and evangelism and take into account whether what happened was rapid or slow.

Part one describes the way conversion has changed throughout the history of the Church, especially in terms of baptism. Part two shows the development of evangelism in the 'modern' era with the religious experience of the individual dominant. Part three outlines some ways forward for a postmodern era presenting a series of vital elements for the Greening of Evangelism

Part One - Conversion and Baptism.

The word conversion is only found once in the New Testament. In Acts 15:3 Paul and Barnabus conclude the first missionary trip by going on to Jerusalem, declaring along the way "the conversion of the Gentiles". The word for conversion is more correctly a translation derived from the Greek word to turn round, turn towards, or turn back, the words usually used in the New Testament to describe the response of a person to the call of God. The word repentance is also part of this group of words used, meaning a 'change of mind'. Thus, while the word conversion is rare, it has become commonplace to use this word to describe the process of actively responding to the gospel.

Stephen Chester in his recent study *Conversion at Corinth* reviews the way many scholars have defined conversion before giving this very careful definition for the word.

"An experience rooted in both self and society. It involves a personally acknowledged transformation of self and a socially recognized display of change."¹

Paul expects the identity of the Corinthians to have been personally transformed and socially changed by their conversion. In New Testament times all these elements were involved in a person saying no to a former way of life, and being baptized into the church community.

Subsequently, in the Apostolic period, the Latin word for conversion was available for the missionary expansion of the church to describe the process by which peoples and individuals became Christian. The English word convert has been used since the earliest of medieval times with a similar meaning. It may be the same word but does it have the same meaning? In fact, the understanding of conversion has not only changed over time, it is used in different ways by various movements and authors.

Alan Kreider in his influential book *"The Change of Conversion and The Origin of Christendom"*² shows how the understanding of what constitutes conversion changed over a period of six hundred years from the time after 100AD to that of early medieval times. He starts with the early Apostolic Tradition when the church was often under persecution. The New Testament 'turning' had by then developed into a four stage process of conversion.

Stage one: a person interested in becoming a Christian applied for instruction. Stage two: the person received instruction weekly to reshape the candidate's behavior until deemed to be satisfactory. This could take a year or two. Stage three: instruction continued with a further period

¹ Chester, Stephen J., *Conversion at Corinth: Perspectives on Conversion in Paul's Theology and the Corinthian Church*. T & T Clark, London, 2003. p. 13.

² Kreider, Alan., *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*. Trinity Press, Harrisburg, 1999.

for the study of belief, and then a series of exorcisms, fasts and teaching culminating in baptism. Stage four: the process was completed and now the person belonged and could attend worship and receive the Eucharist.

This conversion process could take up to three years, requiring a transformation in behavior, belief and belonging for the individual and the community. From 313AD on, after the Church became part of Christendom, the process was gradually modified first limiting then removing specific stages. Within a hundred years the worship services were open to all and were believed to be a means of fulfilling the first three stages. By 750AD in the Carolingian era in Europe infant baptism had become the norm. Some places did require catechetical instruction as the child grew older. Gradually though, it was believed that the socialization process of Christendom itself through worship and participation in a Christian society was sufficient for the person to be Christian.

Yet if conversion is to be a personally acknowledged transformation of self and a socially recognized display of change, what has happened to the church's expectation of changes in behavior, belief and belonging in infant baptism in Christendom? Any expectations for transformation in behaviour, belief and belonging depend upon the supplementation of baptism with a catechumenate, confirmation, or other intentional educational means in addition to ongoing worship. Of course many people do avail themselves of these resources, but over time the evidence is that distinctive gospel elements usually suffer a slow decline as other cultural influences take over. Despite this, the Church has seen many times of rediscovery or renewal in what it means to be individually and communally Christian.

In Christendom, the power given to the church and its leadership provided a means for the Christian message and story to preferentially permeate society. The church remained strong during most of the Medieval Period, given that nearly all people were baptized as infants and attended the church that was in the centre of every community. Yet the issues that led to the Reformation indicated the way that various cultures and practices were white-anting the New Testament message.

The National Churches and Denominational Churches that have developed since then have a similar issue. Slowly over time the values of the host culture take over and lessen the effect of conversion, unless, as has often happened, new movements or initiatives emerge to renew the Church and conversion becomes a means of transformation once more.

Where are we now? What sort of Christians have we become? Some bless us by their insight into the Christian life. I am surprised however, that despite life- long attendance at church, so many people still believe that the gospel is about morality. And that certainly is true for wider Australian society. Most Christians will have had to listen to many so called Pearly Gate jokes or stories. Such jokes or stories reveal the general understanding of Christianity held by most people. They have to, if they are to have a punch line the ordinary hearer will get. In other words they give us the theology of the person in the street.

The Pearly Gate stories provide a humorous overview of what life is about, while at the same time revealing the basic religious structure of life. The purpose of life is to get to heaven. When a

person dies they will get into heaven if they were good, or go to hell if they were bad. St Peter is supposed to find out from the Book of Life who is allowed to enter. This is part of a wider Jewish and Christian understanding of how God judges people by names recorded in heavenly books.

If as Protestants we want to know the scriptural warrant for these stories, they are derived primarily from the conflation of three verses. The first is Revelations 21:21 which states that the twelve gates of the holy city in the new heaven and the new earth are each a single pearl overseen by an angel leading on to a street of gold. The second is the verse in Matthew when Jesus gives St Peter the keys of the kingdom of God. (Matt 16:19). The third (while there are at least two other verses in the New Testament referring to the Book of Life Phil 4:3 and Rev 3:5) is summed up in Rev 20:12. in a scene beyond heaven and earth, "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books." It would be fascinating to know what events brought to public consciousness the condensing of the twelve gates into one gate as the place where St Peter reads from the book of Life to determine who can enter heaven. Is it a more popular religious substitute for the final judgment scene? What is not part of the image is that Revelations places the Pearly Gates in the 'new heaven' for the old heaven has passed away. Also, God as the judge is removed from the scene and Jesus Christ does not even get a look in.

It is as if in the West the power of the culture to modify core elements of the church's message is stronger than the Church's message to transform elements of the culture.

Part Two – Conversion and Evangelism

The word evangelism has a much more recent history. The primary role of evangelism is to bring people to conversion, yet the process of conversion is different. The word 'evangelism' was first used widely in the early 1830's to describe a way of preaching which sought a particular response to the hearing of the message. The word is not found prior to that in reference to the church and is not found in the New Testament. In the New Testament there are other words derived from the word evangel, or Good News, including discussion about the evangel, mentions of evangelists, and evangelizing. Of course in the New Testament there are numbers of accounts of persons making their response to the gospel, as for example on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 were added to the infant church. The Christian world, however, had to wait eighteen hundred years for the emergence of what we now know as evangelism.

This form of conversion was at least a hundred years in the making. It was the result of fundamental changes that were taking place in European thought that flowed on from the Reformation and the Renaissance. In the mid 1600's, Descartes forged a new understanding of the individual as the centre of knowing and experiencing, with his famous "I think, therefore I am." Newton and other scientists demonstrated the power of reason to describe the rational world in which the new self found itself. By 1710 this enlightenment focus upon the individual as the measure of all reality described by reason was continuing to impact on the religious life of English society. At that time Isaac Watts was the first to write a hymn that put the 'I' and 'my' of the individual in the singing

congregation into the center of worship. “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gain, I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.” This was radical re-focussing of religious perspective in terms of personal experience which was so different to the ancient world view of God as the source and ordering of the reality into which a person was born, lived and died.

Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield and John Wesley were the first major figures to focus on the individual experience of conversion in their preaching. From the late 1730's on Whitefield, the traveling evangelist, proclaimed that a person could know that they were born again, while for Wesley, as he crisscrossed Britain, the message was that all people could experience for themselves what it meant to be justified by faith. This enlightenment in the field of religious experience was called 'The Great Awakening' in the American Colonies, and 'The Evangelical Revival' in Britain. For both preachers it was God who determined the moment of divine realization. It was not until a hundred years later in the 1820's that a young Calvinist lawyer turned evangelist in the United States, Charles Grandison Finney, called for individuals to determine the moment of salvation by deciding to put Jesus Christ as Lord on the throne of their life. He declared that a revival was a process, like growing potatoes, for which one could plan. One prepared the soil with prayer, planted the seed of the Word, nurtured it until people found that they were sinners and then prepared for the harvest by offering the forgiveness bought by the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. “Make this commitment now” Finney urged. Thus, a person became a Christian by making a subjective decision to accept Jesus Christ as Lord. Since it was the person's decision, the moment of becoming a Christian occurred at the time of a person's choosing. The penitent or sinner's bench at the front of the church was the liturgical innovation that provided a way for the new Christian to complete the process by declaring publicly what had happened. The public profession was now part of the conversion process. For the first time in Christian history there was a method of preaching that could immediately be evaluated by the results. It was plain to see how many souls were converted in the preaching. The revivalist preacher was born. And a method, called evangelism, created.

This is not to say that in the seventeen hundred years of church history prior to this and subsequent to this, that people did not make individual responses to the gospel. Of course they did. The gospel requires an individual response. They made their response in varying ways as millions of people in various streams of the church have testified. For them though their profound moments of conversion were focused on their baptism, or a living out of the act of infant baptism.

What was new, and remarkable, in this understanding of evangelism, was the placing of emphasis on the subjective human decision and the personal commitment as the moment of individual conversion. What is incredible is that this form or revivalism is what is understood to be evangelism by most in the Protestant Church, and even more amazingly read back into the New Testament. The passages which describe people's turning or repentance do not focus on the subjective elements of that decision, or speak of commitment in terms of this sort of evangelism. What then are the implications of what evangelism for the process of conversion?

First, this is a 'me and God' transaction, that leaves all others and creation as the stage or backdrop to this decision.

Second, this form of proclaiming the evangel emerged in the 'modern era' and is constrained by that world. There is a widespread sense that human attitudes and society are now changing so quickly

that we live in a 'postmodern era'. As yet there is no consensus as to how these major shifts can be described. They range from the claim that such an era is impossible to describe, to this era being an extension of the modern. I have been helped by the Philosopher Stephen Toulmin's description that we live in a time "that has not yet discovered how to define itself in terms of what it *is*, but only in terms of what has *just-now-ceased-to-be*."³ The just now is the modern world that originated from the seventeenth century Enlightenment.

"Modernity esteemed at least four dynamic forces: the myth of unending process, the clear and distinct ideas of universal reason, the power of the self-contained individual directed by his solitary ego, and the ascendancy of human control over nature. By contrast postmodernity is conscious of the end of progress, the limits of reason, the sad isolation of the unconnected individual, and the catastrophe that results when nature is disrespected."⁴

If we set the discovery of the importance of human decision and commitment in the process of individual conversion within the wider social context of the early 1800's it is clear that this approach to the relation between God and a person takes place within the modern era. The process of conversion is often described in terms of 'Four Spiritual Laws', or following the 'Roman Road', or the 'Two Ways to Life'. These publications provide an individual approach, a reasoned basis for decision, and underlines the importance of human commitment in the relation between God and a person. The power of the self-contained individual directed by a solitary ego, is replaced by the power of a self-contained individual directed by Jesus at the centre of a person's individual life. The specific understanding of God has been filtered through the way God in Christ directs the individual person. The focus is on individual redemption. If we take Kreider's categories, the decision itself occurs primarily in the realm of belief. It is not necessarily related to behaviour or belonging. Both may follow, but it all depends upon the belief of the saved person. Baptism may or may not follow.

These are the marks of the 'modern era': control, reason, and the individual in charge.

It led to an amazing phase in the history of the mission of the church. For nearly two hundred years Protestant evangelism has provided a time of conversion, renewal and rededication that has also sent thousands of missionaries across the face of the globe exporting a particular view of what it means to accept Jesus Christ as Saviour. Well over a billion people have committed their lives to Jesus. If you ask a person in the church what is 'conversion', the answer normally is, "A person who has made a decision to accept Jesus or who believes in Jesus or who is saved." That this is subjective, personal and individual is taken for granted. The focus is clearly the redemption of the individual. What a world away from the Apostolic Church Christianity Kreider is describing.

McCullough, citing this approach, asks the question. "But why ... has an entire theology and language of 'personal acceptance' of Jesus swamped the far more pervasive apostolic call to confess 'Jesus is Lord'? The reason, I submit is that it fits more comfortably with our ... sensibilities. So long as I invite Jesus into my heart I'm still in control of things and my personal freedom is in no way

³ Toulmin, Stephen, *The Return to Cosmology: Postmodern Science and the Theology of Nature*, University of California, Berkeley, 1982, p. 254.

⁴ Johstone, E. *Between the times: Religious life and the postmodern experience of God. Review of Religious*, 53, 1,1994, 6-28.

threatened.”⁵ While this is an overstatement by a critic, evangelism has the marks of a method that was created in the ‘modern era’. But what happens when, over time, the pervasive influence of modern culture takes over and the redemptive focus is first diminished, then more attenuated and even completely missed?

In preparing this lecture I had to drastically reassess the significance of the research of John Finney. While this survey is only one indication of what happens when the ‘modern era’ permeates the reality of conversion, and needs to be replicated in other places, what is discovered holds with so much of what has been observed in Australia and the West.

John Finney has to my knowledge conducted the latest and best methodological research into people’s experience of conversion. In 1991, more than 500 people older than 16, who had made a recent profession of faith in the church, were asked a number of questions including ‘What is a Christian?’ The answer, incredibly from my perspective, is that they did not know. The group covered most of the major denominations and those converted in both the individual and baptismal streams. It included a significant number of Catholics, mainstream Protestants, evangelicals and charismatics. For the participants 31% said they had a sudden dateable, experience, while 69% said it ‘crystallized’ gradually, the average time being four years. This study, undertaken from an evangelical perspective, expected people would use phrases like “Someone who believes in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or “Someone who has been born again”, especially since they had all highly commended a series of classes they attended with church leaders prior to making a public confession of faith.

“Only a quarter mentioned that being a Christian was about believing in God, and only 4% spoke of the cross of Christ. Nobody said that baptism had made them a Christian and hardly anybody used the word converted - extraordinary in view of the denominational spread of those participating in the survey”⁶

What did they say? “Nearly all defined a Christian, not so much by what he or she believed, but in terms of friendship and the effect of faith upon their own life. Faith is seen in terms of a three-way relationship: with God, with other people, with themselves”⁷ Finney sees this in very positive terms, stating “If the experience of the being and presence of God is central to faith then the Church needs to acknowledge it as clearly as possible”⁸ It will not surprise that the key events which led to people considering faith were, ‘bereavement, divorce, breaking up or finding new relationships, the birth of children, moving and personal sickness. At the time of ‘turning’, 87% had changed their view of God to one who “is a person, is relevant, and is friendly.”⁹ “Since much evangelistic practice sees repentance as a precursor of faith and tends to define repentance in part as being sorry for what we have done wrong, questions were also asked about ‘any sense of guilt or shame’

Only 39% said they had any sense of guilt – about half of these were ashamed of one particular thing, while the others had a general sense of shame. Perhaps surprisingly, there was virtually no

⁵ McCullough, Donald, *The Trivialization of God: the Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*, NavPressm, 1995, p. 23.

⁶ Finney, John, *Finding Faith Today: How does it happen*. British and Foreign Bible Society, Swindon, 1992, p. 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

difference between the sexes and the over 50s were less likely to feel guilty than those who were younger.¹⁰ “It had been hoped that the research would discover parts of the Christian message which were particularly appealing to different groups of people. However the answers were given in such general terms that it was unsafe to draw conclusions. Forgiveness and the love of God were the most frequently mentioned.”¹¹ What was expressed in hundreds of statements says Finney was “‘I feel much better about myself.’ The sense of improved self-worth and self-image is impressive.”¹² The corollary is that “there was little consciousness of the social dimension of being a Christian.”¹³

“While the forgiveness offered in the gospels is clearly important to many it is not the overriding factor for most. The picture of a guilt-ridden, self-accusatory people finding psychological release by turning to Christianity is sometimes painted. If it is true at all, it is true for only a small minority – the great majority of stories which the participants told did not fit this pattern.”¹⁴

The reality of the discovery of a life-giving relationship with God cannot be denied. What is clear, across many different denominations, is that the Good News that has been experienced is a person’s own internal subjective discovery of greater self-worth. This is an extraordinary diminishing of both the evangelical understanding of conversion, not to say the baptismal form of conversion. It would appear that much of the 200 year old content of a personal subjective experience of faith has nearly evaporated.

If the New Testament has anything to teach us it is that this is a terrible reduction of the faith.

Yet this is what is often found in the church world and the wider public. So often in sermons, novels and other literature Jesus’ message is purported to be, “the Kingdom of God is within you.” This is in fact a mistranslation of the verse in Luke 17:21 when Jesus pointedly told the Pharisees, “The kingdom of God is among you”. Jesus in every other parable, and in specific words about the Kingdom of God, teaches that the Kingdom is to be entered. Because the kingdom is the centre, it de-centres the individual. The temptation in the past was for the Church in Christendom to identify itself with the kingdom, but now at the end of the modern period since the kingdom is within, the individual makes himself/herself the judge of the Church and the character of God.

As Finney points out, the lack of specificity about the presence of God results leads the convert to be one “believing in God and the events which the Bible refers to...”¹⁵ What a serious question this raises. How then is the content of faith derived? No wonder the Bible is such a confusing battleground. The individual chooses from her or his own perspective what seems to be right, and has little basis for doing so. This ranges from the fundamentalist claiming that God’s literal word provides the basis for belief, behavior and belonging, to the liberal who takes seriously the difference between the Old and New Testaments, the importance of truth in science and art, cosmology and learning and considers the impact of these on belief, behaviour and belonging. Between these poles there is such a wide range of positions. Yet for all of the heat in these debates

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 34

¹¹ Ibid., p. 88.

¹² Ibid., p. 89.

¹³ Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 19

from high profile leaders, the Bible is not well known in the Church and less so in the wider community. If Finney is right, and I believe he is, then those who do believe are focused principally on the sense of self worth that God gives. The greater the emphasis on this sort of religion, the more likely it is that the individual will fit into the wider trends of belief, behaviour and belonging that characterize a Western consumer society.

In the West the conclusions are clear. Despite good news stories in many places, both ways of becoming a Christian are I believe in serious trouble, and instead of being a source of transformation, are having less and less impact on Western society.

Part Three - The Greening of Evangelism.

In the last twenty years there has been a great deal of theological interest in evangelism and the act of becoming a Christian. In this last section the principal focus is on the need for congregations and the church to address the core issues of expecting a transformation in the process of conversion. It will not be possible to fully address all the theological issues involved, the changes in the gospel proclamation generation by generation, or follow through on the practical implementation needed. That will have to wait for other opportunities. The key is to recover the expectation of the transformation that conversion brings.

In Part two it was seen that evangelism is an expression of the 'modern' framework that over-emphasizes the individual human role in the divine-human encounter. This modern framework starts with the human race as the peak of creation in an earth centred creation. God then is the creator of the earth, the revealer of the covenant with Israel and the Ten Commandments. God sent Jesus who brought into being the sons and daughters of God through redemption won on the cross opening God's promised future to those who are saved. Those who do not respond fall into the abyss of hell.

What happens when younger generations are grappling with a very different and much more mysterious 'postmodern' view of the universe? In the last fifty years of the 1900's there was a quantum leap in the understanding and scope of the cosmos, from one galaxy to billions of galaxies. We have found ourselves with an evolutionary understanding of a cosmos at least 12 billion years old, in which exploding stars spread throughout space the elements created from hydrogen and helium within the stars. The carbon, silicon, iron, aluminium and all other elements from which we are made were once star dust that eventually formed the sun and the earth some 5 billion years ago. Each one of us is made from the elements created in the furnace of long dead stars! All living forms on this planet share some common DNA but humans have in common with the mammal world of the order of 98% of our DNA. All life is related, and inter-related. How now do we see ourselves and God in this new perspective? As Johnstone states, "I sense that a seismic shift is occurring in the experience and idea of God in our day and culture."¹⁶ What happens when our view of God is

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

undergoing a transformation of the same sort of category change as occurred for 2nd Isaiah, as evident in Isaiah Chapter 40. During the Israelite exile in Babylon the prophet made the leap from living before a tribal God to declaring a God of the whole earth. Similarly new insights, bold affirmations, and profound humility emerge when God redeems not only human beings but human beings in a cosmos of galaxies of billions of years, let alone the possibility of billions of universes!

Major changes are underway in the understanding of conversion in New Testament scholarship. At the roots of the modern view of conversion is the Reformation declaration of the biblical importance of faith. Luther's (re)-discovery of the Pauline view that guilty humans were justified by grace through faith brought a profound renewal to church and society. A hundred years later this was given expression in the Westminster Confession in which every person finds that they are condemned by the works covenant but may find redemption in the grace covenant. How powerfully and decisively this shaped the understanding and experience of faith for all subsequent western Protestants and indirectly for Catholics. In this new personal way of becoming a Christian, the hearer discovers he/she is condemned by the law of God and found guilty before God, but in Christ and through his death and resurrection is set free to be a child of God.

Over the last fifty years New Testament scholars have found this reading of the text that starts with our plight before God (guilt) before moving to God's solution of the plight (justification) is not correct. For Paul it is the other way round. Paul is first dumbfounded with God's unexpected solution before he realizes what his plight really was. As a righteous Jew it was not until "the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8) happened, that he realized he was in the power of unrecognized sin.¹⁷ It was God in Christ giving him God's righteousness which blew his inadequate world of righteousness apart. Rather than the individual sinner being the center of attention, it was the value of knowing Christ that put God into the center. In other words, it is not my decision that is the focal point, but God's act in becoming present to humankind in Christ Jesus. What happens when, rather than inviting God into our world, God invites us into God's kingdom world of earth and heaven, Son and Holy Spirit? Then God becomes the reference point for creation and redemption. The God, who graces us with righteousness, is the green God of creation. Instead of the emphasis on the human in the human-divine relationship in conversion, the emphasis is now on the God known in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in the divine-human relationship in conversion.

But the overwhelming emphasis in evangelism has been on this modern expression of the Pauline decision and commitment framework. It is remarkable that it is only in the last decade that evangelists have used the results of scholarship to articulate the different frameworks of the gospel in the New Testament. Walter Klaiber in "Call and Response"¹⁸ shows the complementary nature of the various formulations of the gospel in the New Testament. I remember the shock of reading L Martynn's commentary on Galatians¹⁹ in which he showed that where all translations use the word

¹⁷ Chester, Stephen J, *Conversion at Corinth*. See pp. 164 -183 for a fuller account of this re-assessment.

¹⁸ Klaiber, Walter, *Call and Response*, Abingdon, 1997.

¹⁹ Martyn, Louis J, *Galatians*, Anchor Bible Commentary, 1998

revelation for Paul's witness to the gospel, the Greek word is actually apocalypse and should be translated as apocalypse. That means that the Damascus Road experience was not a seeing, or discerning, or revelation, but an apocalypse that 'happened' to him. It was a God centred event to which he slowly responded. Such a divine disclosure shocked him to the core of his being that he had to come to terms with. It was not an 'unveiling' of God, it was a divine 'invasion'. To illustrate the force of the word-

Not so long ago I was standing on the beach eating a sandwich looking at the sea, when there was a "Phoof," as feathers brushed my cheek and there was my sandwich flying off in the beak of a large sea-gull. It was a mini-apocalypse, an unexpected happening, that broke in upon my world and left me with my mouth open, trying to comprehend what had happened. Imagine what it was like for Paul as he puts it in Gal 1:12. "for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through an apocalypse of Jesus Christ." Paul spent at least a decade and a half, much of it in deserts, working through this divine eruption. Only then was he able to express in the language of the Jewish Scriptures what had happened to him. The working out of his apocalyptic message is there in Romans 4 in which he reflects on the meaning of faith in terms of Abraham's experience in Gen 15:6. The key word 'faith' for Paul cannot be simply translated as the verb 'to trust', as normally happens, but is a noun. Faith is the imploding realization that God in Christ has forgiven our sin, given us God's righteousness, thereby bringing us into a new relationship with the triune God. It is not so much a proposition as an act and a fact that is given by the all personal Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all, in whom we are called to live. In Paul it is not first our trust, or decision, or commitment, or any other verb we will use, which presume the action starts with us. The focus instead is upon the noun which describes the wonder of what God has done in Jesus Christ. It is the greening of evangelism when we discover we have been called into relationship with a creator-redeemer.

There is so much to discover from the New Testament when one realizes that each of the major writers brings a particular formulation of God's message of call and response. These different ways of speaking about conversion emerged in the early church's experience of a pluralist world of many different religions. I refer those who are interested to "Which Gospel"²⁰, which sets out three of the perspectives that can be found there. The critical insight is that the gospel in its various expressions starts with God's act and then seeks our response, counter to the modern statement of the gospel which puts the individual as the key actor. A postmodern reading of the modern expressions of the gospel shows how often the gospel is restricted to an individualistic straitjacket.

If then it is God who creates the relationship in which we find ourselves, then the nature of the relationship is defined by the character of God. Rather than be limited to asking what God can do for me, what happens when we find that God calls us into a relationship which reflects the very nature and purpose of God? Earlier, Johnstone noted the seismic shift occurring in the experience and idea of God. The foundations have been shaken for evangelicals and liberals alike in the developments of the last half of the 1900's. The eruption of the Holy Spirit movement world-wide

²⁰ Drayton, Dean, *Which Gospel?* Mediacom, 2005.

has re-opened the happening experiential side of belief for millions though, usually within an individualistic framework. This has been accompanied by a re-discovery of the Trinity as the communal description of a God whose purpose is to bring community to the face of the planet, in which giftedness and participation rather than hierarchy and control are at the centre. What a fundamental change this brings to the nature of belonging, behaviour and belief that is appropriate in the life of the church and the community, especially for women and the poor. The discovery or recovery of the Mission of God with the realization that God is the missionary de-centres the church in its missionary task. Now, no longer the centre, the people of God are called together to be a witness, a sign and an instrument of the purposes of God. The dramatic obviousness of the way the Creator has made a universe of interdependence has hit home. The growing awareness of environmental issues and global warming challenge the developed nations to consider how the abuse of the environment rebounds upon all who live on the planet. With the former modern focus on the salvation of the individual replaced with a new awareness of the nature of God as the key to faith, the seismic shift has been toward a discovery of the importance of the church as a community that sees the kingdom of God already involved in the future of the planet.

What does this mean for conversion? Of course the personal response to the living God is absolutely vital, as a person becomes a Christian, but it is a response to God in Christ. In entering into this relationship with God we seek not to restrict, but open ourselves to be brought into the purposes of God in community for the sake of the world. In 1989 William Abraham's groundbreaking book, *"The Logic of Evangelism"* showed how proclamation, church growth, and community celebrations were each inadequate ways of fulfilling the mandate of the gospel. He instead called for evangelism to be understood as 'Initiation into the Kingdom of God'.

“... if we are to take initiation into the kingdom of God seriously, then we need in our evangelism to find room for conversion, baptism, and a commitment to love God and neighbor as elements of initiation. ... I shall argue that we also need to find room for receiving the Christian creed, for owning the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and for embracing disciplines of Eucharist, prayer, and fasting.”²¹

It is this full orbbed understanding of the process of conversion that Abraham outlines that is vital. I would add to Abraham's statement not only the importance of past disciplines, but also future directions, including a call to the mission of God. Note that Abraham uses the word conversion here in the second more restricted evangelism sense that is described in this paper. It is more helpful, I believe, to define conversion in Kreider and Chester's way in which conversion is the description for the whole process of initiation into the Kingdom.

The definition by Chester only serves to point out the importance for the Church to be aware of its responsibility to expect transformation of the convert in the process of bringing together all the elements of conversion. Whether the changes involved when a person is initiated into the presence of God happen quickly or slowly, it is vital that the Church is an essential part of that experience and

²¹ Abraham, William, *The Logic of Evangelism*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1989, p. 118.

the personal appropriation and responses made in terms of behavior, belief and belonging. Conversion is entering into a God initiated community process of discovery and learning that a person's redemption is part of the redemption of the whole creation as well as the community and individuals within it. It is responding to God's call to be baptized into the body of Christ within the world as a sign, a witness and a sacrament of the presence of God.

The church is to be the mid-wife working with the Holy Spirit in the mystery and meaning of conversion. That calls for a focus of attention on the Church's expectations that we have for a person becoming a Christian. Have we not sold God, our members and society short? The process of conversion, of becoming a Christian, is far more than the importance of morality and greater self worth. To add to Chester's definition of conversion, it is the transformation that comes in Jesus Christ, "an experience rooted in *God, self, society and world*. It involves a personally acknowledged transformation of self and a socially recognized display of change"²². It is initiation into the kingdom, kingdom or presence of God. It is the transformation of individuals and societies. This is the greening of evangelism we are invited to consider.

The next step then is to find ways to resource congregations so that they can be the mid-wife, growing and fulfilling the expectations that becoming a Christian entail. The resources to do this are many and varied, but as yet their use is patchy and inconsistent.

Conclusion

This lecture is a call from the heart. It is a critique that invites us to wake up to the new day that is already dawning.

Let us finish with a prayer.

"O marvelous mysterious Trinitarian God, help us escape from too limited a declaration of who you are so that we may experience a full orbbed conversion in which we grow more fully into the behavior, belief, belonging, that is summed up in our baptism into the Body of Christ..

Free us from our sin, blindness, and self referencing lives and keep growing us in the Body of Christ as a people who in the power of the Holy Spirit are more able to love You and our neighbors as you have loved us in Jesus Christ. Amen"

This lecture is part of a wider work on the issue of Mission being undertaken by the author.

²² Chester, Stephen J., op cit., p13. The words in Italics are added to the quote which is given on p. 2 of this article.

