

Conversion

INTRODUCTION

Conversion is a common experience of life. It is something that is happening every day in both insignificant and significant ways. People change their minds, their allegiances and their ways of life at regular intervals.

At the time of writing you may be involved in a careful study of plasma TV's because, whether you like it or not, your area is converting from an analogue to a digital signal. The Fairtrade movement is making representations to Lord Seb Coe to make the next Olympics a Fairtrade games – or you may have just changed your brand of coffee or chocolate. You may have just seen a television programme about euthanasia and you are seriously reviewing your ideas and beliefs in the light of it. Or you may be seriously considering the claims of Islam or the Orthodox Church because their beliefs and values seem particularly attractive to you at this point in your life.

All of these are conversions. People change both their lifestyle and their way of thinking for a whole host of reasons.

To say this is not to downgrade religious conversion or to lessen its importance in the Christian experience, but it does provide a context for what happens in people's lives in the process of their faith journey. Research demonstrates that conversion is a process of change. This may or may not include a major change in direction. If it does it will almost certainly involve a lot of small changes along with it.

Before we actually look at Christian conversion, it is worth trying to dispel a number of misconceptions that colour people's understanding of both conversion and evangelism.

➤ **God and faith are found uniquely inside the Church.**

Many ministers will have had the experience of school children describing him/her as the person who lives in the church. Too often, what is perceived as true for the minister is to an even greater extent perceived to be true of God. One of the failures of some Old Testament theology was that the people believed that God lived in the temple and it was therefore, invulnerable. In Christendom contexts, the same attitude has sometimes been transposed to nations, denominations and local churches. Only as we realise the understanding that Yahweh is God of the universe, neither limited by, nor choosing only to work in and through the Church, will we begin to gain an adequate perspective on both evangelism and conversion.

➤ **Un-churched people are not people of faith.**

Grace Davie is a widely respected teacher in the field of sociology of religion. Her book, "Religion in Britain since 1945" has the strap line ""believing without belonging" and her thesis is that modern-day Britain is not the secular society that some have made it out to be. Rather it is a society full of what she calls "common religion". This concept is widely accepted in the discipline and while it may be little more than a form of folk religion, it is real and a phenomenon with which a fully-formed Christianity needs to dialogue.

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe in a God who can change the course of events on earth?"

"No, just the ordinary one." (Davie 1994:1)

Evangelism is the place where the Christian God meets the "ordinary God" and conversion is usually from one kind of faith to another kind of faith.

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- **Conversion is the acceptance and repetition of a creedal formula.**

Whether it has been at a service of confirmation/baptism or at an evangelistic event, there has been an emphasis on the use of sets of words that represent the Christian faith. A person makes a confession of faith and it demonstrates that they have become/are Christians. Those saying "I do" on such occasions, however, will be at different points on their faith journeys and it is possible that someone in the line has serious doubts about the statements of faith s/he is affirming. The confession of faith is not unimportant – Jesus drew it out of Peter in Matthew 16 – but it needs to be recognised that such a confession is neither the beginning nor the end of the story. It wasn't for Peter, it won't be for many other Christians.

- **Conversion is a short-term experience if not an instantaneous one.**

This is the corollary of the previous misconception and I shall address the issue later in this paper. For most people, conversion – even to the point of making a confession of faith – is a process that takes quite a long time and will continue following any formal expression of faith and belonging to the Christian community.

- **Conversion is a wholly individualistic event.**

Both personal and the corporate aspects of the faith journey should be recognised. Most of us would want to disown those practices where tribes and people groups were forced to convert to Christianity by a militant form of Christendom. At the same time, we want to recognise that the community of faith plays a significant part in the change of mind and lifestyle that accompanies true conversion. In a culture where people belong before they believe and common religious experience is a significant factor in the conversion process - the "friends" factor even more important. In addition to this dynamic, if we accept that conversion is into the Kingdom of God, then it will necessarily have a community dimension as well as an individual one.

It is only as we recognise that Christian conversion is a re-alignment of peoples' lives – both individual and corporate – to the present and coming kingdom of Jesus that we begin to recognise an evangelistic practice that matches the needs of people in their search for God. It is only as we recognise that Christian conversion is a life-long experience of allowing the Holy Spirit to match human life (both ideas and practice) to that of Jesus will we help people to arrive at a more fully-formed and mature faith.

WHAT IS CONVERSION?

- (i) **New Testament terminology and concepts.**

Having outlined the meaning of conversion in secular and in broad religious terms, I turn to the Bible and its related concepts.

In coming to our world, the Word of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth stepped onto an extremely religious stage, a stage on which faith and theology played a very large part in the lives of both individuals and society. It was in this context that he called good Jewish people to "repent" and "believe" (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14,15). Jesus continued where John left off (Matthew 3:2) in calling believers to be converted.

Both John and Jesus called the people "to have another mind" (metanoeo in the Geek) because the Kingdom of heaven/God had come near. The same message was echoed by Peter on the day of Pentecost and he was speaking to an equally if not more religious group within the community.

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Although the word describes something going on in a person's head/mind it is not associated with creedal formulae, it is associated with ways of life in general and sin in particular. John had taught that a change of mind, together with an act of cleansing, brought forgiveness of sin. Jesus taught the Pharisees and the teachers of the law that his job was to recall lost sheep to the fold and that there was greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repented than in the ninety nine righteous people who had no need of repentance (Luke 15:1-7). The apostolic teaching followed the same pattern. God had made Jesus "prince and saviour" so that Israel might repent and receive forgiveness of their sins (Acts 5:27-32).

The word, "to convert" (epistrefo in the Greek), although used much less frequently, also appears in the New Testament. In Luke 22:32 it is set in a very interesting context. Jesus is talking to Peter about his denial and his subsequent rehabilitation. When he has turned back – been converted – Jesus says, he should strengthen his brothers. Peter puts metaneo and epistrefo together in Acts 3:19. He is addressing "men of Israel" and the outcome of this change of mind and turning to God is both forgiveness and the refreshing that comes from the Kingdom.

The third concept that needs to be taken into account is found in John, Peter's and Paul's writing. In John it is on the lips of Jesus. To Nicodemus, a deeply religious man (a man who needs no repentance?), Jesus says that he must experience another birth, a spiritual birth (gennethe another in the Greek), if he is to see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3).

At this point, we need to disregard any connotations associated with the phrase "born-again Christians" and any observations that people have made about the number of births on offer. The word "another" only appears in chapter 3 in John's Gospel (verses 3, 7 & 31). Verse 31 is always translated "from above" and the emphasis is not on the quantity of births – how many times it happens – but on the quality of the additional birth – its nature and origin. Nicodemus' need was not for a new faith but for a present experience of the coming Kingdom. This present reality of the Kingdom of heaven could only be effected by the Holy Spirit's coming into his life in such a way that it could only be reasonably termed a new birth. The same concept of regeneration is affirmed by Peter (1 Peter 1:23) and Paul (2 Corinthians 5:17) although in neither of these instances is the new life associated with the coming of the Spirit.

All this means that, from a biblical perspective, a change of ideas and beliefs, and a change in lifestyle are at the heart of the Christian experience. This change involves a turning to God and a reception of the Holy Spirit who makes the life of the coming Kingdom a present reality in human experience.

It is clear from the New Testament that God's intention is to create a new Israel – a people called out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9-10) – to be representatives of his Kingdom and to witness to its reality in their worship, their common life and their relationship with the world around them. However, the question about how long it takes to conform to the life of the coming Kingdom still remains.

(ii) Conversion – the when, why and how?

In 1958, John Taylor wrote a book called "The Growth of the Church in Buganda: An Attempt at Understanding". In it he outlined the process that he observed in the lives of converts to Christianity. His analysis was that for some time two worlds existed alongside each other. Then the Christian world into which converts had come began to dominate as it made greater and greater demands on both the person's beliefs and way of life. This inevitably led to a crisis point when a decision had to be made about which world would win the day. He called the four stages; "congruence", "detachment", "demand" and "crisis" (Taylor 1958:43-49).

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The question raised from the "mission field" is, "When has a person become a Christian?"

Consider this experience....

People suffering the results of famine in their own country emigrate to a new country. They are economic migrants of a sort but they are good people and the local population receives them well. The sons of the family meet local girls, they are naturally attracted to them and want to marry them. This is the story of two such girls. They marry the two sons of the immigrant family and the "mixed marriage" has implications. Do they change their religion, do they accept their husbands' god or do they continue to worship their own god and be true to their own culture.

The marriages are good and relationships with the in-laws work well. There is genuine affection despite the differences.

Their father-in-law had already died but, unfortunately, disaster strikes twice more. Both sons die leaving three widows. Mother-in-law decided to return to her homeland and both daughters-in-law plan to return with her. However, because there is genuine affection, she urges her daughters-in-law to stay, to find new husbands and to remain with their own people. "Maintain your citizenship in your homeland, stick with your faith and culture, there is little hope for you with my people, in my culture, with my god." After some persuasion one girl, Orpah, decides to return to her people. The other, Ruth, decides to commit to being a Jewess. She decides to go to Israel, accept the Jewish people and their faith and become the great grandmother of King David and ancestor of the Jewish Messiah.

The question is, "When was Ruth converted?"

Or consider this experience.....

A godly man had been brought up to believe in many gods but had become dissatisfied with these beliefs and with the lifestyle that went with them. Because he was an officer in the army, he had been sent to serve abroad. Stationed north of Israel, he had come into contact with the Jewish religion and he had been attracted both by its theology and its practice. He and his whole family had become devout Jews. They were exemplary in their devotional lives and in their commitment to the poor.

One afternoon, in a vision, an angel came to him and told him to send for a man named Simon living in a nearby town. This he did. Despite his better judgment, Simon went with a group of friends. He was received with great honour – even worship. In response, Simon told his host that he shouldn't really be there and it was only because of God's intervention that he had come at all. However, he proceeded to tell the army officer and a gathering of friends and relatives about Jesus. While Simon was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell on the assembly - to the great astonishment of the visiting group. They knew that the Holy Spirit had visited because their hosts started praising God in strange languages.

Simon concluded that they should baptise these "gentiles" because they had clearly been accepted by God. This they did and stayed on for a number of days to teach them more.

The question is, "When did Cornelius and his family become Christians?"

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Or consider this experience.....

Simon was a devout Jew. Along with many others at the time, he was expecting God to do something new in Israel. He was expecting – hoping – that the Messiah would come. He and his brother had been attracted by the ministry of John the Baptist and, while at the Jordan, Andrew had met Jesus and introduced the Rabbi to Simon. They had spent days travelling with Jesus and talking with him before he invited them to leave the family business and to join his class of disciples. Following that, they experienced authoritative preaching, healing miracles, power over demons and other quite inexplicable things. Inexplicable, that is, unless the Kingdom of God really had come to earth. When challenged, Simon had been the first to declare that Jesus was the Messiah. He had also been the first to oppose Jesus deliberately endangering his life in Jerusalem. He had dramatically betrayed his teacher and his friend and, like the other disciples, he had no expectation of Jesus' coming back to life after his crucifixion. He was the first to go back to fishing and he was the first to stand and proclaim that Jesus was Messiah when filled with the Holy Spirit. He preached the Gospel, he healed the sick, he raised the dead and he was imprisoned and beaten for his faith – and he couldn't cope with having Gentiles as partners on the Way.

The question is, "When was Simon Peter converted?"

(iii) Joining the Christian community – in the theological discourse and in practice

It would be quite wrong to assume that the concept of gradual conversion is something new. Alan Kreider, in his very helpful little book, "The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom", writes about the practice of the Church in the early centuries of its life. He talks about the "journey of conversion" finding expression in "four stages of resocialization" (Kreider 1999:21). These were evangelisation, catechism, enlightenment and mystagogy. The first stage (evangelization) was an informal relationship with the Christian community in which the basic truths of the faith were offered until the "candidate" reached a point where they were formally introduced to the leadership of the Church and accepted for formal teaching as catechumens. The second stage was formal teaching in which the understanding and worldview of the candidate was realigned with that of the Kingdom of Jesus. This period of teaching contained some experiences of God – exorcisms, for example, were part of the training – but it culminated in the full rite of enlightenment, baptism, and entry into full membership of the Christian community (the third stage). The short, fourth stage, was added in the 4th century and consisted of instruction in the mysteries of baptism and eucharist. These had just been experienced at Easter by the individual who, now baptised, was fully accepted as part of the Church. Coptic writings evidence that this process could take 3 years and in Southern Spain the evidence describes a 5-year process (Kreider 1999:24). Kreider's overview was that conversion involved change in 3 areas of life: in belief, in belonging and in behaviour and these 3 were of equal importance and necessary precursors to baptism.

What is particularly interesting in Kreider's analysis is his description of the failure of all these facets of conversion in a Christendom context and his argument that the Church in the 21st century is "back for the first time in something like the earliest centuries of Christianity..." (Kreider 1999:xvii). His suggestion is that the Church today should take the early Church models seriously because they address the need for conversion in belief, belonging and behaviour that is evident in a post-Christendom culture.

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In 1992, John Finney, then the Church of England Officer for the decade of evangelism, wrote a report called "Finding Faith Today. How does it happen?" This was based on research sponsored by Churches Together in England and conducted by the Bible Society, a professional researcher (Pam Hanley) and Finney himself. It was based on a survey of 511 people who had made recent public professions of faith. The form of these professions varied widely because of the breadth of churchmanship represented but each participant had a story to tell about their spiritual journey. The report is well worth reading as a whole but I offer you a few of its findings here:

- 76% of those who became Christians as adults had a reasonably long contact with Church during childhood. 70% had 'dropped out' between the ages of 10 and 15 years only to return later.
- All the participants expressed their faith in terms of relationship with God, other people and themselves. There was very little reference to doctrine.
- Only 31% said that their experience was datable.
- The average time to discover God was about 4 years. However, during this time, Church events and relationships were cited as significant factors.
- An evangelistic event was a main factor in only 4% of the stories although it played some part in a further 13%.
- 60% prayed regularly before they became (more committed) Christians.
- The three most important factors that led participants to a commitment were Christian friends, their spouses/partners and their ministers.

This research gave long-needed support to what many Church leaders had recognised for long time. The conversion process for most people was a comparatively long one. It was also a complicated one, often with a number of factors playing a significant part in the changes of mind and direction of life. It was also one in which certain discernable factors were repeated again and again.

One of Finney's expressed hopes was that this research would help Christian leaders rethink their models of evangelism. He took his thinking a step further only a few years later with an examination of differences he saw in the evangelistic techniques of the Celtic and the Roman Churches (Finney 1996). Although he was careful to warn against caricatures, he painted a picture of a centralised, authoritarian Roman model most concerned with truth and instruction in the ways of God compared with a free-wheeling, creative Celtic model most concerned with people and an experience of the power of God.

In his own work, a well-respected American missiologist, George Hunter, summarized Finney's thesis in the following way:

"Bluntly stated, the Roman model for reaching people (who are "civilized" enough) is: (1) Present the Christian message; (2) Invite them to decide to believe in Christ and become Christians; and (3) If they decide positively, welcome them into the church and its fellowship. ... Presentation, Decision, Assimilation. What could be more logical than that?

But you already know enough to infer the (contrasting) Celtic model for reaching people: (1) You first establish community with people, or bring them into the fellowship of your community of faith. (2) Within fellowship, you engage in conversation, ministry, prayer and worship. (3) In time, as they discover that they

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now believe, you invite them to commit.

We can contrast the two models on a chart:

Roman Model	Celtic Model
Presentation	Fellowship
Decision	Ministry and conversations
Fellowship	Belief, Invitation to Commitment"

(Hunter 2000:53)

The implications of this analysis are twofold. Firstly, it is clear that there has been variety in the models of evangelism used over the Christian centuries and this variety has reflected the different ways in which people change their minds, their allegiances and their lifestyles. Secondly, both Finney and Hunter want us to accept that the Celtic methodology for evangelism is more relevant in a post-modern, post-Christendom world than the Roman one.

This assessment of the conversion process and the correlating approach to evangelism has received further support in both academic circles and in what might be called popular theology and practice.

As a well-respected academic, Robin Gill set out his stall quite clearly:

"Some believe that effective preaching is a priority: first we must people's minds and turn them to Christ, then we can expect them to come back to church. Others (including myself) believe, quite oppositely, that belonging usually precedes belief and that structural questions are crucial." (Gill 1994:8)

He then went on, in his book, to present a convincing argument that belonging comes before believing.

In 1995 and in a very different context, Laurence Singlehurst, then Director of Youth With A Mission, England, wrote a small book called "Sowing, Reaping, Keeping" as a guide to evangelism. In it he used his own version of the Engel scale to define people's attitudes to and beliefs in God. Twenty years earlier James Engel and Wilbert Norton had used a scale to describe the change in a person's relationship with God. This was a 12 point scale where a person started at -8 with a vague belief in the supernatural and progressed through a series of belief stages to their birth as a Christian (their conversion) at the zero point and then a progression to +3, the point of Christian discipleship. [See the appendix for an outline of the Engel scale.] Singlehurst used the principle rather than the detail and referred to a non-specific scale that started at +1 and represented a very negative view of God and worked up to +9 or 10 at the point of conversion. Neither the detail of Engel's scale, nor the lack of specifics in Singlehurst's use of it, is important in this paper. Here, the important issue is the understanding that most people in English culture are at the lower end of a scale in their understanding of and beliefs about God and this means that evangelism practice has to be geared accordingly. Singlehurst argued that people had to be helped on a journey of faith before they could make a commitment to Christ. Perhaps, even more importantly, he affirmed that every step a person moved forward on the scale was evangelism.

"So what really is evangelism? It is meeting people at whatever point they are at on the scale and, through the encounter, their picture of God and the church is

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changed. Through this change, step by step, they see the gospel message is good news for them and relevant to their situation.

So if someone moves from step one to step two, that is evangelism, and likewise if someone goes from point five to point eight. And if we take someone from step eight to step ten and lead them to Christ, that is evangelism as well." (Singlehurst 1995:20)

Over the decades straddling the Millennium, the overwhelming understanding about conversion was that of a process. While critical points might occur during that process and while commitments and rites of passage might be helpful, conversion was increasingly perceived as process rather than crisis.

A study of the conversion process from the psychological and sociological perspectives as well as the religious all point to the complexity of the phenomenon. It is not necessary to become an expert in the reasons why people convert but it is helpful to have an idea of the factors usually recognised in the process and an idea of the complexity of the way they interrelate.

Lewis Rambo's work in his book "Understanding Religious Conversion" provides an accessible way into the subject. He offers an overview of the different approaches to and writers about the topic and his diagrams make it clear that different factors play significant roles in the conversion process for different people at different times. He summarised the "multiplicity of approaches" in the field and likened the research to the fable of ten blind people describing an elephant from their own limited perspective (Rambo 1993:16). He stated that "no single process or stage model articulated thus far has been satisfactory to everyone" and proposed a "multidimensional", "historical", "process oriented" model containing "a series of elements that are interactive and cumulative over time." (Rambo 1993:17) He pictures this in the following diagram:

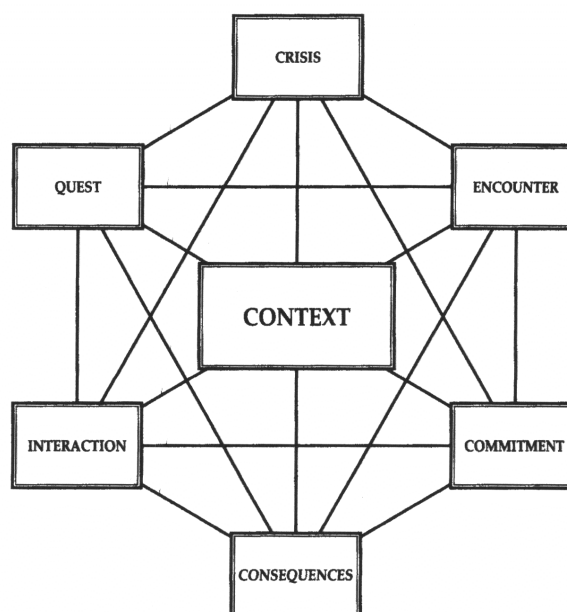


Figure 12.3 A multidimensional model of conversion.

When discussing each of the elements, that element became the central and largest box. This together with the inter-relatedness of all the elements offers a graphic description of the complexity of the process. He concludes:

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"As we have seen, conversion is a complex, multifaceted process involving personal, cultural, social, and religious dimensions. While conversion can be triggered by particular events and, in some cases, result in a very sudden experience of change, for the most part it takes place over a period of time. People change for a multitude of reasons, and that change is sometimes permanent and sometimes temporary."
(Rambo 1993:165)

My own research confirms the complexity of the conversion process. I followed the faith journey of people in three youth congregations and found elements that supported all the different conversion theories (Hall 2004:393-396). Some sort of crisis was part of the experience of eight of my interviewees. Fifteen expressed quite deep emotional needs. Expressions of attachment were also evident in these cases. Sometimes this was attachment to God as the provider of love and comfort, sometimes to Christian friends and often to both. Ten interviewees had gradual "conversions" that came about because of their introduction to the Christian community by Christian friends. All of these expressed the importance of their spiritual experience, as did many of the others already mentioned. Two of the interviewees conducted an intellectual spiritual search following particular and unexpected spiritual experiences and just one person had been on a spiritual search for two years before her encounter with Christianity. None of these categories was to be found as the sole reason for people coming to faith and other factors, from chance encounters to supernatural interventions, could also be described as part of the equation.

All of this research data pointed to the fact that conversion to faith is a complex and personal experience. The variables in the stories and the complexity of people's pre-conversion relationships defies the production of neat definitions. At the same time, common factors were also evident....

- the experience of God as a life-enhancing, tangible force;
- the presence of "cool", entrepreneurial leadership role models;
- the presentation of God as an accepting substitute father and Jesus as an ever present friend and comforter;
- the offering of open, authentic and supportive small groups;
- the presentation of hope and purpose for the future in an alternative lifestyle different from the false hopes perceived in the philosophies of the previous generation(s).

These factors played the largest part in the process of conversion in these youth congregations and were the indicators for "successful" evangelistic activity.

CONVERSION AND EVANGELISM

If we accept that conversion is a complex issue, we also need to ask if there are clear points of reference based upon which we can do our evangelism.

(i) Starting points.

People do not convert from non-faith to faith. They convert from one form of faith to another form of faith. It needs to be clear, therefore, that all evangelism is a conversation – a dialogue – between one set of ideas and another set of ideas.

It could be argued that the most successful evangelistic tool during the 1990s and 2000s has been the Alpha course. Because of its origins within the evangelical and charismatic

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wing of the Church of England it uses a quite conservative presentation of propositional truths about the Christian faith. At the same time its context, in the form of a community meal, and its application, in the form of discussion groups has made it a vehicle for dialogue and process rather than responsive crisis. In addition, the only programmed opportunity for response during the course is to an experience of the Holy Spirit rather than an affirmation of propositional truth. The Alpha Course has allowed people to join the train with their own sets of baggage and to unpack them and change them at their own pace – or to get off the train if they so wish. Many churches have followed an Alpha course with a special follow up group or with a continuing home group or cell structure. It could be argued that this is a form of discipleship rather than an evangelistic tool or it could be a recognition that conversion and discipleship are different ways of expressing the same process and the catechumenate of the early Church is not so far from some present day practice.

The starting point for all our evangelism, however, must be the recognition that people have already experienced something of the smorgasboard of faith that is British culture and that the modern-day evangelist is not usually a preacher but a good conversationalist with a cup tea in her/his hand.

(ii) The process.

John Finney asks the question, "What is a typical modern journey of faith?" (Finney 1996:46). His answer, despite the diversity in detail is:

- "X is introduced into the church through a member of their family, through friendship with some Christians or through a minister;
- they begin to ask questions;
- they are invited to explore further and come to a knowledge and practice of the faith (often this is through a nurture group or some form of catechumenate);
- they discover that they have become a Christian, and mark it publicly through baptism or confirmation or whatever is appropriate to their denomination."

The truth of the matter is that very few people (if any) come to faith because they hear a preacher or pick up a Christian tract, commit their lives to God and then look for a fellowship of Christians in which to express their new-found faith.

In 2002, in an interview with the then leader of Youth For Christ, he told me that the most fruitful evangelistic tool in the previous year had been the Labyrinth. The Labyrinth was a guided walk through spiritual experiences that attempted to give people an opportunity to meet God and themselves in a new way (see labyrinthuk.org for an example at the time of writing). It was wholly personal and experiential and allowed people to meet God in their own way and in their own time. The place of worship, spiritual experiences, prayer and healing were all significant factors for many who come to faith in present-day British culture.

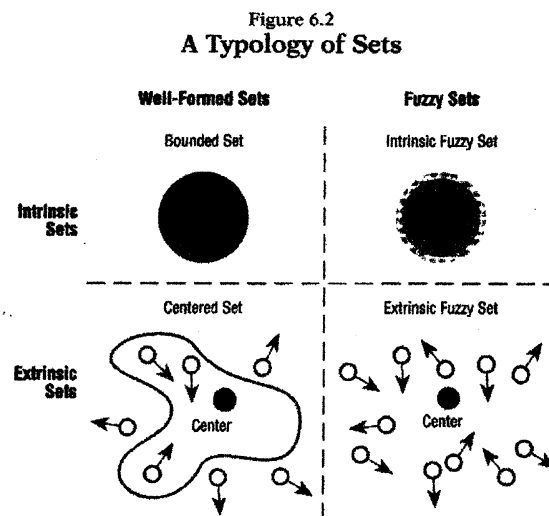
In 2008, a local Methodist minister found that the annual remembrance service for those who had had funerals in the church during the previous year coincided with the monthly communion service. After a lot of heart-searching he decided to do both in the same service and was profoundly – if happily – surprised at the number (by no means all) of un-churched people who presented themselves at the communion rail (normal Methodist practice) for communion. Two of the people in question couldn't get up there fast enough and ignored the directions of the stewards in order to share this particular experience of God.

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(iii) Reaching the goal - a fully formed faith.

If the starting point is indefinable and the process is full of variables and personal religious experiences then the end point needs to be clear and well defined.

Paul Hiebert, an academic anthropologist and missiologist, has a very helpful description and discussion on the typology of sets (groups of people) in a mission context. (Hiebert 1994:111-133)



These "sets" are defined as

"well-formed" i.e. having very clear boundaries,

or

"fuzzy" i.e. having boundaries that are not so well defined.

They are also defined as being

"intrinsic" i.e. defined by their boundaries,

or

"extrinsic" i.e. defined by their centre.

Hiebert describes a mission church as an extrinsic, fuzzy set and this fits very well with the conversion process that we have been describing in a post-Christendom world. In practice this would mean that church would be defined by its centre – the person of Jesus – and people would be invited to relate to the community who were following him without a boundary, without a statement of faith or a rite of passage. Only later, when an individual became convinced of the centre would they be invited to make a profession of faith and commit to the way of the community through a rite of passage. This, of course, presents problems for churches whose demarcation between members and non-members has been well defined and where this demarcation has been represented by formal and extensive statements of faith. If this analysis is anywhere near correct it calls into question the

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usefulness of the form of church membership traditionally practiced by a number of denominations – the URC being one of them. It also demands some careful defining of the centre.

Perhaps the implication is that we should be more concerned with developing peoples' faith in Christ and experience of the Holy Spirit than in making them members of the church.

CONCLUSION

In drawing to a conclusion I shall reverse some of the misconceptions that plague the Church in its evangelistic effort and make them into positive affirmations.

- God and faith may to be found in every area of human life.
- Un-churched people are usually people of faith.
- Conversion is a common experience in human life.
- Christian conversion involves a change of mind, a change of lifestyle and a change of allegiance / community.
- The acceptance and repetition of creedal statements is an important but limited manifestation of both conversion and a fully formed faith.
- Conversions are normally experienced over a considerable period of time. Crisis may play its part but is usually only part of a much more complex set of dynamics.
- Other people play a significant role in both the conversion process and the lifestyle to which the convert commits.

During the 1990s, the Roman Catholic Church offered a concept of evangelism to the wider church that many responded to very well. They spoke of evangelisation rather than evangelism and they spoke of the need to evangelise churched people as well as un-churched people.

This idea fits well with the biblical concepts that we have already alluded to.

In Isaiah 6, a man of faith and religious experience, a man who already recognised sin well enough (see chapter 1) had such an experience of God that his consciousness of sin was heightened immensely, his cleansing from guilt completed and his call to ministry redirected. As a man of God his life was turned round – he was converted.

In Acts 9 and Acts 10 two conversions are recorded. The first is Paul's conversion on the Damascus road. In it he came to understand Jesus in a new way, his life was changed dramatically and he made a whole new set of allegiances as well as starting a new lifestyle. The second is Peter's conversion on a rooftop in Joppa. He came to understand Jesus in a new way, his life was changed dramatically and he made a whole new set of allegiances as well as beginning a new lifestyle. While the changes of understanding about Jesus were clearly different in the two cases they were both life changing and part of a process that led both Peter and Paul to what Paul later described as "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13)

John Hall - November 2010.

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Conversion

APPENDIX:

The Engel Scale

(Found in "What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest" by James Engel and Wilbert Norton, Zondervan 1975)

This was an attempt to describe the process a person went through in their coming to faith in Christ and their subsequent growth in that faith. It has appeared in this and a number of modified forms over subsequent years.

- 8 Awareness of a supreme being but no effective knowledge of gospel
- 7 Initial awareness of gospel
- 6 Awareness of the fundamentals of the gospel
- 5 Grasp of implications of the gospel
- 4 Positive attitude towards the gospel
- 3 Counting the cost
- 2 Decision to act
- 1 Repentance and faith in Christ

Regeneration

- +1 Post-decision evaluation
- +2 Incorporation into the body
- +3 A lifetime of growth in Christ - discipleship and service

EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

Take a look at the website for new materials appearing

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to John Hall for contributing this material. John chairs the Vision4Life Evangelism Year committee. He has a doctorate in Missiology and youth congregations were the subject of his thesis.

How to feedback to Vision4Life?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group and the coordinator about general issues via the website or at admin@vision4life.org.uk

Website issues can be dealt with through web@vision4life.org.uk

If you have comments and particularly contributions to the evangelism year, you can email the V4L evangelism year coordinator via evangelism@vision4life.org.uk

If you want to make contributions or ask questions about other V4L years you can email:

Year 1 – Transformed by the Bible: bible@vision4life.org.uk

Year 2 – Transformed through Prayer: prayer@vision4life.org.uk