

**HOW OUR
UNDERSTANDING OF CONVERSION
CAN HELP OR HINDER
OUR EVANGELISTIC EFFORTS**

by

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How Our Understanding of Conversion Can Help or Hinder Our Evangelistic Efforts

Introduction - In my almost 9 years of life and work in Russia and other countries I have spent a considerable amount of time asking questions about the nature and results of Western evangelism in cross-cultural settings. After moving to Russia it didn't take long to discover, first hand, that the reported conversions from our evangelistic efforts were in no way matched by the reality. Then, after pursuing more in-depth research, observation, study and meditation, I was driven to an even further development of my thinking about the theological and missiological implications of evangelism and conversion. The points that I make in this short article constitute only a sample of what I have discovered, and a much more in-depth treatment of the issues is required (a project that is one central aspect of my continuing missiological efforts).

I have become convinced that there is a widespread deficiency in biblical wisdom among those doing cross-cultural evangelism, and some of the most critical deficiency is in the understanding of fundamental principles of soteriology and communication. In many countries, westerners are being labeled as simplistic and superficial, and I have come to sadly agree that this assessment is too often accurate. One issue that has come up repeatedly in my conversations with Russians is that of Western missionaries' understanding of conversion. In this article I will suggest a few key issues of conversion and then, echoing the perspectives of my friends from Russia and other countries, offer some applications for our approach to cross-cultural evangelism.

A. Relevant Principles of Conversion

1. Regeneration is Invisible - The new birth is a spiritual event undetectable by the human eye. In addition, it has an unpredictable, mysterious element, being the work of the sovereign Holy Spirit. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3:8) Only God sees the inner nature of another person; we cannot, and must not naively suppose that we have a window into the human heart. All we can see are external actions that may or may not be indications of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. To begin with, therefore, we must respect and never trivialize the mysterious aspect of regeneration.

2. Only God Gives Life - A person must have the Spirit of God indwelling or he is not saved: "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him." (Rom. 8:9) Only those regenerated by God are truly His. And a person is not capable of "birthing" himself. Furthermore, he is not even able to come to Christ by his own strength: "No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:44) There is no mechanism whereby a person can give himself spiritual life - it is granted by God (John 17:2). Therefore the central issue of regeneration centers on the operation of God, not man. We must not suppose that we can offer people new life, or that we can offer people a means to regenerate themselves. The Spirit of God is not ours to "dispense," nor is He theirs to "acquire."

3. Conversion is a Process - I believe, with probably most evangelicals, that regeneration happens at a moment in time. "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word, and believes Him who sent me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life." (John 5:24) One is either born again or is not. However, from our human perspective as missionary evangelists, we are not seeing regeneration in others. We can only

see the process of old things passing away and new things coming (II Cor. 5:17). Since we cannot see the inner transformation, we must rely on what is outward and visible in order to discern new life. Conversion can only be observed as a process of life change, expressed in words and actions. And furthermore, even from the perspective of the new believer, conversion is more likely experienced as a process, though the new life began at a point in time. Truly regenerated people are often unable to look back and identify the point at which they had passed into new life. They didn't have the biblical understanding or spiritual discernment to interpret what was happening to them along the way. While becoming awakened to their new life, they often tend to wonder whether to expect something else more to occur than has already happened to them (the source of many early doubts of their conversion). On the other hand, nothing spiritual has happened to unregenerate people, but they can be led to believe that they have all that they need as a result of something that supposedly took place at some point in time (and as a direct result of some action they took). In the early stages, therefore, to emphasize a "point in time" mentality of conversion can be to aim a seeker toward potentially improper expectations. The result can be somewhat damaging even to true believers, but can be devastating to the unsaved, aborting the process of coming to new life.

4. Fruit is Inevitable - Conversion and new life are inseparable, and the visible evidence of spiritual life is spiritual fruit. The patient observation of a true convert will be rewarded with visible signs of a changed life. Again, since he is a new creation, the old things will pass away with the coming of the new. This is not to say that maturity comes quickly or without struggles and setbacks. Furthermore, the initial actions of a true convert may not be satisfactory to an observer who has a preconceived grid in his mind of exactly what should be expected. However, in the longer term, spiritual fruit will reflect the Holy Spirit who lives within every child of God (Romans 8:9). The missionary can rightfully expect to see fruit, and has every reason to doubt the conversion of a person who shows no spiritual growth, regardless of whatever actions or words came from that person at the supposed time of regeneration.

5. Fruit can be Counterfeited - Not everything that looks like spiritual fruit is an evidence of conversion. Many words and actions of a person, especially in the early days of exposure to and response to the gospel message, are not from the Spirit of God, but are from the natural man. Natural commitments can result in very zealous actions (look at the Pharisees - Matt. 23:15). These are not from the Spirit of God, but can appear very similar to His work, and their natural source is not easy to detect. The human heart is full of deceit. Although the natural man is not ready for spiritual life, is not willing to submit to God, and cannot receive spiritual truth on his own (I Cor. 2:14), he is often willing to perform convincingly in order to be acceptable to other people for one reason or another. Becoming "religious" has never been a true sign of conversion (and in fact is often the sign of an unbroken pride). People are amazingly flexible, and like children can learn to mimic the words and actions of others to whose society they have prolonged access. This "fruit" cannot grow to maturity, but either fades or takes the form of something self-centered.

B. Relevant Principles of Evangelism - Based on the principles above, I see several applications.

1. Begin with Sobriety and Humility - The attitude of the missionary must reflect an appreciation of the profound nature of spiritual transformation. We must accept with complete sobriety our position as a spiritual guide, and the delicate work that this entails. Given the danger of misdirection, both naïve and cavalier attitudes toward the giving of

spiritual instruction are unacceptable. Our confidence and adequacy depend entirely on the Lord (2 Cor. 3:5), apart from whose operation we can do nothing (John 15:5).

Unfortunately, Americans often come across as frivolous and self-confident in their role as cross-cultural evangelists. We should be humbled by the fact that our actions and words are shaping the understanding of others toward the gospel, on which eternal life depends. We must examine ourselves and see if we are reflecting the heart and wisdom of God as we labor.

2. Give Biblical Instructions - Only God's instruction is true instruction, and so God's word is the source for the directions we must give toward new life in Christ. We must not fall short or go beyond these instructions when we deal with the unconverted. Many instructions given to unbelievers are not to be found in Scripture, and seem to be based on the desire to give a person something to "do" in order to complete the conversion transaction. But there are no external actions, including a prayer, which can *bring about* internal reality or force God's hand. Instructions to "accept Jesus into your heart" or "pray to receive Christ," along with other similar formulations, place the attention of the seeker upon his own actions, as if by some activity he could open a gate and the Lord would be required to enter in. Rather, a person must see that new life depends on the action of God, and that he must seek the Lord Himself rather than perform any particular man-made action or ritual. It is this realization of helplessness that brings the sinner into the fearful prospect of direct dealing with the Sovereign God (a prospect his heart naturally avoids). For this reason, instructions for particular actions are less critical in leading a person to Christ than are explanations of the truth and of the general call of God to repent and believe in Christ. As the seeker hears the words of truth, the Holy Spirit is able to act in ways that are unseen to us, and the result will be faith, repentance and confession.

The dangers of unbiblical instruction are magnified across cultural lines, where man-made conversion instructions become further distorted by language differences. People may naturally tend to turn their attention toward us, wanting to please the wrong party. We must lead them to Jesus, and know where our role ends. Although people we deal with in cross-cultural ministry often seem to come to faith coincident with a prayer or an act of commitment, I have seen that conversion rituals are more likely to abort the process than to induce it. But nobody truly coming to faith is in need of such a ritual. No human force can prevent a soul once it has been enlightened by the Holy Spirit, from pressing in to God. But unbiblical means of salvation can leave people complacent though still lost, and later attempts to encourage them to follow Christ may be rendered much more difficult.

3. Accept Uncertainty as Inevitable - This principle follows from the prior. If God has not given us any absolute proofs of another's conversion, we should not expect such proofs. There are no particular visible actions that invariably signify invisible realities. We should not expect to have certainty over the spiritual state of another person, and we should learn to live with this state of uncertainty. Westerners tend to naively desire everything to be cut and dried, easily categorized and labeled, and feel nervous if their system doesn't hold up. Their fear of ambiguity leads them to offer a simple step to take in response to the question "what must I do to be saved?" Rather, we must be comfortable to stick to the broader instruction given by Scripture. No true seeker will be put off by this kind of guidance, because in his desperation he will not rest until he understands the biblical truth about salvation, has truly met the Lord on His terms, and has experienced the inner certainty of the new birth.

Again, cultural differences compound the difficulty of interpreting the actions of individuals in response to hearing the gospel. A zealous desire to identify converts quickly, often as part of a desire to create statistics, leads to much misinterpretation and unfounded claims of conversions (especially in the wake of mass evangelism efforts). At the very least,

we should use words of a tentative flavor when we describe the results of our efforts, and put away the fear that our uncertainty is a result of ineffective ministry.

4. Lead to Biblical Assurance - We can certainly preach a certainty of salvation, though we do not tie it to the performance of any particular action as mentioned above. But true assurance of salvation cannot be "given" by us to others. We can explain the basis of salvation from the Scriptures, but only the Holy Spirit provides inner assurance in conjunction with His Word. We should never feel a pressure to "close the deal," which very often leads to an interruption of the spiritual process rather than a completion of it. And moreover, healthy warnings are better in leading to true assurance than are uncritical verbal assurances. It is wise to express our inability to judge a person's spiritual state while pointing that person to deal directly with God. The lost person may want our certainty to be a substitute for his dealing with God directly. We can only point to Scripture and direct people to go to Jesus. Then our teaching about assurance of salvation will coincide with the convert's inner experience.

Spiritual fruit by its very nature takes time to identify. "First the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head" (Mark 4:28). At the time of the blade, there are unfruitful tares that seem identical to the wheat. The mind and heart of the natural man can be distorted in many ways. We must be ready to deal diligently and soberly with the heart of a lost soul, seeking for constant feedback in the process and calling on people to examine themselves (2 Cor. 13:5). If not, we face the common problem of people that have become acculturated rather than converted. Many such unsaved people will utilize explanations and definitions that others have given them when describing their "conversion experience." Even truly saved neophytes do not have the biblical understanding to be able to explain what they have done (whether they are converted or not), and sometimes "read back" into their experience the elements that are offered to them by others who are teaching them about salvation. It can be because of these explanations, rather than out of their own deep convictions, that they identify their conversion point at one time or another. They want their conversion to be "valid" and thus alter their own perceptions (and testimonies) to fit the pattern. Thus dealing in simplistic rituals and formulas for conversion can prevent the development of biblical assurance. The unconverted gain unwarranted, shallow assurance and the converted become confused when they compare their experience and the "party line" interpretation of it. They will then alter their testimony to something that they cannot communicate with conviction, and second-generation evangelism is rendered less effective.

5. Develop Spiritual Discernment - This principle is perhaps the key to the others. There is a critical need among missionaries for spiritual discernment, which includes clear biblical understanding, wise observation, and spiritual sensitivity. We must be very cautious in our interpretation of a person's actions and our resulting evaluation of their spiritual state. In my research I found that the points of conversion identified by missionaries were often quite irrelevant to the reality as candidly explained by young believers. There was a common tendency for missionaries to be credulous. They commonly valued the idea of "acceptance" of people rather than examination, as if being cautious would mean they were skeptical. They seemed to equate being gracious with never probing or challenging. Too many are too easily convinced, by any kind of positive response, that a person is converted. This attitude is ultimately damaging to our work of evangelism, and does the unconverted no good. It is the eventual longer-term life adjustments that will be better indications of the inner reality, and the discerning missionary will be a patient listener and observer. Spiritual work is not pop psychology, and its fruits cannot be produced artificially.

To be a mature missionary, one must grow in the ability to discern cultural clues. My Russian friends were often shaking their heads at the lack of discernment shown by American missionaries in the face of obvious (to them) phonies who crowded around missionaries in order to gain material help of one kind or another. Furthermore, Americans were commonly unwilling to listen to the warnings given by Russian believers regarding such "seekers," as if Russians were just too skeptical. Part of spiritual discernment for a missionary is the realization that reading signals across cultures is demanding work worthy of patient study, and that it is no shame to distrust one's own judgment when evaluating people of another culture.

Conclusion

The commonly mentioned failures of missionaries are those based on an inability to communicate across cultural lines. I would like to suggest that many of our problems go back a step further, in that an understanding of biblical principles is commonly lacking on the field. Ever in search for something "new and improved," American missionaries are often in danger of out-smarting themselves. But God's principles cannot be mocked - true fruit comes from simple obedience to the word of God. Even the best cross-cultural communicator is not going to have fruitful ministry unless it is built on a foundation of biblical wisdom. Such wisdom must not be taken for granted, but should be an integral goal of missionary training. Otherwise we will export superficial notions that will result in artificial transplants, rather than the living body of Christ, in foreign cultures.

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