

Soundly Converted?

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Some failed modernist exceptions apart, the principal aim of missions down the centuries has been to effect conversions. Those men and women who have taken it upon themselves to answer the call of Christ to 'go and make disciples of all nations' have, by the very nature of their activity, sought to increase the number of those claiming the name 'Christian'. In doing so, they have employed a wide variety of different strategies, hundreds of different languages, an assortment of technologies and techniques. Through them, Christ has walked the earth dressed in the garb of countless different cultures – sometimes the culture of the evangelists themselves, sometimes, where that was different, the culture of the people they addressed or, more often, a curious interface of the two.

But always, as a controlling factor over all of these, was the sometimes unspoken assumption about what actually constitutes 'conversion'. By what criterion might the preacher account her or (more usually) his mission to have been a success? In seeking to change or, according to one's viewpoint, to interfere with the lives of others, what sort of change, how much interference, was required to pronounce the patients cured, the pagans converted? Should those on the receiving end of this evangelism walk down to the front of a meeting at the issue of an appeal? Say a prayer? Embark on months or years of soul-searching in order to come gradually to a place of settled assurance of salvation? Leave house and possessions to go and follow the preacher? Adopt western clothes? Be baptised into the new religion of the king, feudal lord or tribal leader? Is mental assent to Christian propositions the thing primarily sought for? Or is it the observance of Christian religious practices? The adoption of a Christian lifestyle? Repentance and inner spiritual transformation?

***Mission and Meaning
Essays Presented to Peter
Cotterell***

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Or some combination of all these? Which of the possible changes best answers to the description of 'conversion'? Responses to these questions tend to determine the expectations of the missionary or evangelist, and so to act as controlling assumptions about the techniques and methods to be employed. Here there is space to examine briefly just two of these dilemmas: should the normative conversion be immediate or gradual? and does mental assent suffice, or should something deeper be looked for?

1. Immediate or Gradual?

How quickly should the evangelist expect results? Those in the book of Acts clearly found hearers who made an immediate response. One thinks of Peter's audience on the day of Pentecost, of whom Luke concludes by saying that 'those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number *that day*' (Acts 2:41). The Ethiopian eunuch who responded to Philip's exhortation was similarly baptised there and then (Acts 8:36-38). Again, the Philippian jailer and his family were baptised, and thus accounted as being within the household of faith, in the middle of the night (Acts 16:33). The issue is nothing like as clear-cut as these biblical references might seem to imply, of course, but nevertheless it is clear that immediate conversions were hardly unknown to the first preachers of the Good News.

It was with a certain confidence, then, that John Wesley in the eighteenth century could urge the need for an instantaneous conversion experience. Responding to his critic William Warburton, bishop of Gloucester, he quoted that prelate's own words against him: 'Sacred antiquity is full in its accounts of the sudden and entire change made by the Holy Spirit in the dispositions and manners of those whom it had enlightened; instantaneously effacing their evil habits,' and commented, 'Never were reflections more just than these. And whoever applies them to the matters of fact which daily occur all over England [in Wesley's own movement]... will easily discern that the changes now wrought cannot be accounted for by... mere reason, for they are sudden; therefore they can only be wrought by the Holy Spirit.'¹ Certainly he was influenced by his own experience, or at least by his own interpretation of that experience; his conversion had occurred on 24 May, 1738, at a

1 John Wesley, *Works*, ed. G.R. Cragg (Oxford: OUP, 1975) 11:505. See H.D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast* (London: Epworth, 1989), 148-49 for a discussion of Wesley's view on this topic, and the influence of Peter Böhler and the Moravians upon him.

meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, when he had felt his heart 'strangely warmed' and 'felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine'.² His brother, Charles, well expressed the belief in the suddenness of conversion in his hymns: the human spirit lay 'imprisoned... fast bound in sin and nature's night', but at the 'quickenning ray' of divine conviction, 'I woke' and at once 'the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free'. The unconverted were exhorted to 'Come in *this moment* at His call'; the newly penitent were to pray 'Come quickly in, Thou heavenly Guest'.³

Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875), the great American evangelist, also called for immediate decisions in his evangelistic meetings. These decisions were then accepted as conversions, and the converts were promptly added to the local churches. One person who attended his meetings in Rochester, New York in 1830 recorded: 'After... the conditions of salvation were laid with perfect conspicuousness before every mind, and all was said that could be said to urge their immediate acceptance, all who had come to a fixed determination to accept at once, were requested to tarry after the congregation were dismissed, that special prayer might be offered in their behalf... Those who were determined to accept at once the conditions laid before them were requested to signify that determination by rising. Simultaneously hundreds arose from all parts of the house.'⁴ Finney introduced 'anxious seats' at the front of his meetings, to which inquirers could come, with the expectation that an immediate conversion would result. D.L. Moody, the late nineteenth-century inheritor of Finney's mantle, was a little more circumspect, and unwilling to intrude on personal privacy by the application of such pressure, but he nevertheless made appeals for 'decisions' and held 'after-meetings' to encourage these. One particular appeal at the end of a sermon in London in 1872 surprised the evangelist himself, for when he asked all who would like to become Christians to get to their feet, almost the entire congregation arose. The bewildered evangelist thought he must have explained himself badly, and only when he had indicated for the third time that only those intending to commit their lives to Christ should remain behind did it dawn upon the preacher what an awesome

2 John Wesley, *Journal*, ed. N. Curnock (London, 1909) I:475-77.

3 *The Methodist Hymn-Book* (London: Methodist Publishing House, 1954), 371.4; 323.5; 333.4.

4 Cited in K.J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney 1792-1875: Revivalist and Reformer* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1990), 208-209; see also 199-200.

effect his sermon had made upon his hearers. Almost every one had reached an immediate crisis point.⁵ By the age of Moody, Frances Jane van Alstyne's well-known hymn was encouraging millions of Christians to give voice to the sentiment that 'the vilest offender who truly believes, *That moment* from Jesus a pardon receives'.⁶ The song both reflected and reinforced what worshippers already 'knew'; the expectation that most conversions would be immediate was a firmly entrenched part of evangelical culture. Billy Sunday, the early twentieth-century revivalist, knew it as well. He fed conversion statistics to the press, and after one campaign in Iowa in 1904 the local paper's headline duly announced '516 Turn To Christ'. Sunday himself pressed hard for immediate conversions; at one rally he leapt onto a chair at the end of his sermon and urged: 'How many of you will walk out and give me your hand and say, "I will live for Christ from now on the best I know how"? Come on, come on, come on.'⁷

The potential unattractiveness, as well as the possible practical shortcomings, of this approach will be apparent from Sunday's behaviour. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, not least its basis in the New Testament, the expectation that conversions should be sudden has tended to predominate amongst evangelicals, especially those inclined to a supernaturalist emphasis, down to the present. On the basis of Acts 2:41 Ern Baxter, the Canadian preacher and apostle of the early house-church movement, made fun of the practice, common amongst Baptist churches, of delaying baptism of the newly converted until after they had attended a series of baptism classes; if conversion was immediate, then acceptance within the Christian community and the use of 'the keys of the Kingdom' in baptism should be immediate too.⁸ Indeed, baptism, rather than an appeal to come to the front, was, in Baxter's exposition, the correct response to the immediacy of conversion.

Despite the popular expectation amongst modern evangelicals that conversions could and would be sudden, few have argued that they *must* be so; nevertheless, this was the implicit norm. The idea has not passed unchallenged, not least by those who were unhappy with the notion of sudden conversions – especially those based on appeals at evangelistic rallies – at all. It is not necessary to agree with

5 J.F. Findlay, Jr., *Dwight L. Moody: American Evangelist 1837-1899* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 262-63; W.R. Moody, *The Life of Dwight L. Moody* (Kilmarnock: Ritchie, 1937), 138-39.

6 *The Methodist Hymn-Book*, 312.2.

7 Douglas W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 176-77.

8 W.J.E. Baxter, audio cassettes from Dales Bible Week, 1977.

Iain Murray's criticism of Billy Graham's evangelistic appeals that 'while Graham says "There's nothing about the mechanics of coming forward that saves anybody's soul", too many statements of this kind suggest the contrary to the average person'.⁹ Few evangelists have been more responsive to criticisms they deem to have some justification than has Dr. Graham, and he has often been at pains to stress that conversion is the response of the heart, not the mechanics of coming to the front of a meeting. But the burden of Murray's complaint, and that of those who think and have thought like him, comes from elsewhere. R.L. Dabney, the nineteenth-century American Old School Presbyterian whom Murray quotes with approval, complained: 'In almost every case where true grains of living wheat are found among the masses of chaff raked together by these efforts [evangelism that presupposes sudden conversions and urges "decisions for Christ"], there will be found a preparatory work in the heart, the result of intelligent scriptural teaching and consistent Christian example, watered for some time by the Holy Spirit in the retirement of their homes... Had scriptural means of grace been used with them, and no others, they would have come into the church in due time, none the less surely, and with a piety more symmetrical and profound.'¹⁰ The uneasiness is with the notion of sudden conversions at all. In the Puritan tradition in which both Murray and Dabney stand, conversions should take their time. Whilst there might be thought to be practical reasons for this preference, the basis for it is doctrinal. Murray's *critique* of Graham is, at bottom, theological: 'Under inadequate gospel preaching, where only man's duty to repent and believe is emphasized and his need of re-birth to *produce* this response is passed over, it is very easy for hearers to confuse their own mental assent with a faith which is not of ourselves but "the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8)'.¹¹ The trouble with gospel appeals, then, is that they are in conflict with the logic of Reformed theology as expounded by writers such as Murray, because they imply that man is able to do something (accept Christ, or make a gesture that he is willing to do so) to save himself.

From this perspective, what is true of gospel appeals is also true, though to a lesser extent, of sudden conversions as a whole. As the quotation from Dabney implied, a longer period of coming under conviction and to a settled confidence or assurance of one's own

9 Iain Murray, *The Invitation System* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 39, n. 15.

10 R.L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological* (1890, repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 1:571.

11 Murray, *Invitation System*, 21.

state of salvation should be the norm. The reasons for this are to be found in no small measure in Calvinism's doctrine of 'limited atonement', the conviction that Christ has died, not for the sins of the whole world, but for those of his individually predestined elect alone. Calvin, despite his predestinarianism, nevertheless mostly taught that Christ had died for all people, even if not efficaciously for all. His successors, beginning with Beza, had taught a limited atonement. The result of this doctrine is that the person coming under conviction must face a period of introspection. As R.T. Kendall points out, limited atonement moves attention from the question 'has Christ died for sinners?' to 'am I one of those few for whom Christ died?' 'To Calvin, looking to Christ is faith; Calvin could point men directly to Christ since Christ died for all. Beza begins not with Christ but with faith; faith, if found, is rewarded with salvation in Christ but this salvation comes to the believer indirectly... Beza delays assurance until the "effects" are there; thus a change of life precedes the assurance that we have faith indeed.'¹² On the Bezan, and later Reformed, view, conversion implies the conviction that one is amongst the predestined elect and, unsurprisingly, this does not usually come suddenly. As Thomas Hooker (1586-1647), Puritan lecturer at St. Mary's, Chelmsford, remarked, 'It is hard to say at what instant faith is wrought, whether not till a man apprehends Christ and the promise, or even in his earnest desires, hungering and thirsting, for even these are pronounced blessed. Some having got hold, hold it faster than some by much, yet none but with doubtings sometimes; yet some are much privileged this way, especially that came hardliest by it.'¹³ The concentration here upon the self, rather than upon Christ, is worthy of note; faith was required, not so much in Christ, as in respect of one's own electedness. As Kendall justifiably observes, 'Hooker thinks "faith cannot be sudden" because "Christ will not enter by violence, where-ever he dwells". However, Hooker does note that God "may doe as he please" in saving men, but the long process "is the course of God generally".'¹⁴

Since faith is, in this tradition, such a self-reflective act, many 'conversions' are likely to depend upon one's own assurance of salvation. John Bunyan's account of his own conversion in *Grace Abounding* will serve as one of the best known examples: 'Neither as yet could I attain to any comfortable persuasion that I had faith in

12 R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: OUP, 1979), 34-35.

13 Quoted in Kendall, *Calvin*, 129.

14 Kendall, *Calvin*, 130.

Christ; but instead of having satisfaction, here I began to find my soul to be assaulted with fresh doubts about my future happiness; especially with such as these, Whether I was elected? But how, if the day of grace should now be past and gone?¹⁵ The revival that attended the preaching of Jonathan Edwards at Northampton, Massachusetts in 1734 was not provoked by any doctrinal change of emphasis on the part of the preacher. His auditors had been under the sound of the gospel for years; although many were undoubtedly truly repentant for the first time during the revival itself some, at least, of the conversions, must have been cases of what other Christians would call simply 'assurance'.¹⁶

The case for gradual conversions is not a monopoly of the Puritan tradition, however, nor of the theological formulations upon which that tradition has long rested. The early, albeit post-biblical, church also was in no hurry to see particular individuals swept into the kingdom after hearing one sermon. The cause was in many ways the opposite of that which moved the Puritans. Many, even most, of those converted through the latter movement were all too familiar with demands which the gospel, and in particular Puritan formulations of it, made upon them. But the cause of the slowness of second and third-century conversions was precisely the *unfamiliarity* of the targets of evangelism with the essentials of the gospel to which they were required to respond. Most of the converts described in the book of Acts had been either Jews or that *penumbra* of Gentiles – the God-fearers – who surrounded the synagogues of the *diaspora*. They had known who God was, and were well aware of the claims of the moral law. Cornelius the centurion had been 'devout and God-fearing', and had given 'generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly' (Acts 10:2) before ever he heard the gospel. Philip had found the Ethiopian eunuch engrossed in the prophecies of Isaiah (Acts 8:30-35) and curious about the niceties of interpretation. This was a luxury which the evangelists of the second and third centuries were not to have. By that time, most converts were coming into the church from pagan backgrounds, with little or no previous

15 John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (London: Dent, 1976 edn), §57.

16 See Jonathan Edwards, *Faithful Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, §2, which describes the wide variety of conversions at Northampton, both the traditional drawn-out affairs and those in which 'God has *of late* [my emphasis] abundantly shown, that he does not need to wait to have men convinced by long and often repeated fruitless trials'. The latter, sudden conversions, were an innovation, from the standpoint of Edwards and his fellows, brought about by the revival itself.

understanding of the presuppositions of Christian faith: the creation of the material world by a good God, accountability to that God's moral law, God's self-revelation in the Jewish Scriptures, eternal life and eternal death.

In the 1994 Laing Lecture, Alan Kreider described how the second and third-century catechumens underwent a period, 'possibly several years in length... internalising the history of God's people and experiencing a re-reflexing of their responses'. They also took part only 'in the first part of the Sunday worship of the church. Week after week they enter the door, but only just. For, although on Sundays as other days they will hear the reading of the Scriptures and the expositions of the reading, they will then be reminded that they are only catechumens. They must leave before the mysterious rites that follow.'¹⁷ One church manual from around the year 300 advises, 'Let catechumens spend three years as hearers of the word. But if a man is zealous and perseveres well in the work, it is not the time but his character that is decisive.'¹⁸

2. Assensus or Fides?

What is the depth of commitment required before the would-be new Christian is pronounced 'converted'? W.R. Estep, in describing the moment at which Menno Simons broke with his past as a Catholic priest to join with the despised Anabaptists, comments: 'Then and only then was Menno converted. Until that moment his faith had been *assensus*, not *fides* (or *fiducia*). There was intellectual acceptance but no life commitment.'¹⁹ The definition of this distinction is an acute one. Many evangelical movements have sought to elicit the latter transformation, whilst many state churches have contented themselves with the latter. But these are generalised observations, not an infallible rule, and where evangelicals have been attached within state churches, of course, the result has been more complicated. The transformation of the early church's position in the fourth century, however, with the end of persecution and establishment of toleration in 313 followed by all manner of imperial favours and, as the century wore on, growing pressure on the population to 'turn Christian', the level of commitment of new entrants into the church declined noticeably. Eusebius of Caesarea felt able to crow, in 325, that those who had left the church under the

¹⁷ Alan Kreider, 'Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom', *VoxEv* 24 (1994), 20.

¹⁸ *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, 17.

¹⁹ W.R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 118.

pressure of the early fourth-century persecutions returned after the coming of toleration: 'Strength has indeed come to hands that were weak... [many now] march straight forward along the road to the knowledge of God, in haste to rejoin the flock of the All-Gracious Shepherd. If the tyrants' threats have reduced some souls to torpor, even they are not passed over by the Saving Word as incurable.'²⁰ W.H.C. Frend has expressed the new position thus: 'At once the missionary situation changed completely. The faith could now be proclaimed openly, its advance was fostered by the emperor, and individuals in official positions had every inducement to convert.'²¹ As early as the 340s, Firmicus Maternus could call on the emperors to destroy idolatry so that pagans might be rescued, even against their will, from the consequences of their error.²² The family of Constantine exerted pressure on pagan practices, especially sacrifices, and many pagan shrines were destroyed. A number of Christian officials profited personally from this despoliation.²³ By the early fifth century, Augustine was able to point to his own town, which had previously been 'wholly on the side of [the schismatic] Donatus', but had been 'brought over to the Catholic unity by fear of the Imperial edicts', and was now so wholeheartedly Catholic that 'it would scarcely be believed that it had ever been involved' in Donatism. Impressed by the actual results of coercion, he supplied a theory to justify it: had not the householder in Luke 14:23 told his servants to 'Compel them to come in' to the feast?²⁴ These later sticks were brought in where earlier carrots had failed. As early as 325 – that is, within a dozen years of the official toleration and encouragement of Christianity – a town in Phrygia was requesting tax privileges on the grounds that its inhabitants were all Christians, whilst Maiuma in Palestine secured civic independence from Gaza by undergoing conversion *en masse*.²⁵

It is not necessary (although it is tempting) to stigmatise all such changes of allegiance from paganism to Christianity as spurious or insincere. Augustine, in the case of his home town, insisted that the

²⁰ Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 10.4, ed. G.A. Williamson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 392.

²¹ W.H.C. Frend, *Religion Popular and Unpopular in the Early Christian Centuries* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1976), VIII:9.

²² J. Stevenson and W.H.C. Frend (eds.), *Creeeds, Councils and Controversies* (London: SPCK, 1989), 22.

²³ T.D. Barnes, *From Eusebius to Augustine* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1994), VIII:322-37.

²⁴ Stevenson and Frend, *Creeeds, Councils and Controversies*, 220-22.

²⁵ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 166.

inhabitants were, by the time he wrote, 'filled with detestation' of the 'ruinous perversity' of their former views. Perhaps he looked for more Catholic zeal than was really present. What is certain is that formal mental assent was looked for rather than, initially at least, any deeply personal spiritual transformation. Those who were 'compelled to come in' could hardly have been expected to yield anything more. It is this insight which lay behind much of the repressive machinery of the later Middle Ages; if the heretic recanted, his or her life was usually spared. Nor were over-zealous measures taken to detect the secret dissenters unless their actions in proselytising or worship compelled the attention of the public authorities. It was an attitude most famously expressed in the sixteenth century by Elizabeth I: even under the ideologically embattled and besieged conditions of her reign, she was able to insist to those of her Protestant advisers who were too eager to seek out secret Catholic sympathisers that 'We will not make windows into men's souls'. Assent sufficed.

Martin Luther's conversion, the culmination of years of spiritual struggle (*Anfechtungen*) was anything but a bare intellectual assent. However, the spiritual history of many of his followers shows little evidence of spiritual crisis beyond an acceptance of Luther's ideas. Philip Melancthon, the great scholar who so ably assisted the Wittenberg reformer, and who was the author of the Augsburg Confession, seems to have come by his new faith simply on the basis of his conviction that Luther was in the right. Ulrich von Hutten and some of the other knights who so crucially came to Luther's defence seem to be in a similar category.

Bernardino Ochino, the Italian theologian who came to England to help the cause of the Reformation during the reign of Edward VI, taught that the person who believes in Christ, even for a moment in time, was undoubtedly saved, for whoever sees themselves saved in Christ sees the truth, and 'that which is once trewe although it were but for the twincke of an eie must be said to be euer true.'²⁶ Again, this is salvation based upon perception of verities, not upon spiritual transformation. Many evangelists who have sought 'decisions' for Christ are, implicitly at least, accepting a similar criterion.

Over against this understanding of conversion lies those who have perceived *fides*, or commitment, as the essential element in conversion. From this standpoint, doctrinal affirmations may be less important than the personal surrender entailed. Usually, the position

²⁶ B. Ochino, *Fourtene Sermons* (London, 1551), B.viv. See also Meic T. Pearce, *Between Known Men and Visible Saints* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1994), 206-207.

taken is that affirmation of the Christian verities is essential but not, of itself, sufficient to constitute 'conversion'. The conversion of Menno Simons, the sixteenth-century leader of the Dutch evangelical Anabaptists, is a classic case in point. For the best part of a decade he had adhered to evangelical doctrines, even preached them, whilst continuing to hold his position as Roman Catholic priest of Witmarsum so that, as he said, 'I might enjoy physical comfort and escape the cross of Christ.'²⁷ He was unwilling to leave and join the persecuted Anabaptists, but reflected that 'if I should gain the whole world and live a thousand years, and at last have to endure the wrath of God, what would I have gained?' Only upon his trembling repentance, request that God would 'create within me a clean heart', and acceptance of the forgiveness of Christ did he account himself 'called... into the narrow pathway of life and the communion of His saints'.²⁸

Augustine, more than a thousand years previously, may have argued for compelling people to assent, but his own conversion had demanded a deeper commitment from him than this. He had been wrestling with the Christian verities for some time, but realised that what held him back was his unwillingness to give up his sexual promiscuity. The moment of decision came for him when his attention was caught by the text of Romans 13:13-14: 'Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites.'²⁹ Only when he was willing to abandon his lascivious lifestyle did he account himself converted.

Martin Luther identified his realisation that 'the righteous shall live by faith' as the moment when 'I felt myself straightway born afresh'; the act was purely mental, but it followed, rather than preceded, prolonged repentance – in his case over years – and brought about spiritual rebirth.³⁰ The same could not be said for all those who followed him. Wesley, similarly, felt his heart 'strangely warmed' when 'I felt that I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved me from the law of sin and death'.³¹

27 Menno Simons, *Complete Writings* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1956), 670.

28 Simons, *Complete Writings*, 670-71.

29 Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII.12, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 178.

30 E.G. Rupp and B. Drewery, *Martin Luther* (London: Edward Arnold, 1970), 6.

31 Wesley, *Journal*, I:475-76.

Again, this is *fides*; the abstract proposition ('Christ died to save sinners') has been personalised and appropriated, with transformational consequences.

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The danger of this kind of analysis is that it can reduce to formula and category what is bound to be individual. But to refrain from looking at difference is to make ourselves vulnerable to undesirable kinds of doctrinal shift. From an evangelical perspective, conversion is not simply a this-worldly phenomenon, a theological interpretation imposed upon essentially psychological phenomena. Conversion is an event with eternal consequences, consequences which form no small part of our motivation for mission. As Christ's ambassadors seek to 'make disciples of all nations', so they seek to inculcate 'belief'. The nature of that belief can never be a mere abstraction for those who take these commands seriously, for they hold that it is only by 'believing' that 'you may have life in his name'.