

DAVID GREENLEE

ONE CROSS

ONE WAY

MANY JOURNEYS

Thinking Again About Conversion



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David H. Greenlee



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With Deepest Gratitude

To my wife, Vreni, for loving me and walking with me these twenty-one years;

To my parents, J. Harold and Ruth Greenlee, who taught me the Scriptures from my earliest days;

To Leola Fraley and my other Sunday school and Vacation Bible School teachers from my early childhood, whose names I have forgotten;

To Howard O. Jones, whose sermon God used to draw me to saving faith in Jesus Christ over forty years ago;

And to Bill Morrison, whose quiet, worthy witness touched many lives.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	ix
1 Starting the Journey	1
2 Inside Out or Heading Home?	7
3 Conversion at the Core	19
4 Groups, Families, and Anyone Who Believes	37
5 Congruence, Conversion, and Christian Witness	51
6 Who's to Judge? Looking in from the Outside	67
7 Worthy Witness	85
8 Fathoming the Unfathomable	97
9 Conversion, Politics, Power, and Transformation	109
10 The Defeat of Darkness and Deception	129
11 Becoming the People of God	141
Postscript	151
Bibliography	153
Notes	163

PREFACE

We live in a busy world. In the marketplace and too often in Christian ministry we are driven by values related to performance, pragmatism, efficiency, and profit. Many of us relish the thought of a change of pace: a day with the family, playing a favorite sport, maybe a chance to go fishing or to read that book we have always wanted to finish, or perhaps to just have an afternoon to do nothing. But if we ever do get ourselves into such a refreshing situation, too quickly the mobile phone buzzes or we just *have to* check to see if an important e-mail has arrived.

When I joined Operation Mobilization nearly thirty years ago, international phone calls (at least from Asia and South America) were rare, difficult, and expensive—a far cry from our current Internet-enabled information addiction. Since then the pressure to be continuously connected has become at times overwhelming and, more often, unnecessary. Such was my recent experience in southern Africa when my trans-

lator's cell phone went off three times as we tried to present the Sunday morning sermon together.

Why do we so rarely find the time to think or to reflect on life, God's Word, and the things that are, or should be, of most importance to us? In asking this I do not refer just to the United States or Europe but also to Korea, India, Singapore, Brazil, and beyond.

I have been a frequent participant in conferences and congresses drawing together missionaries and church leaders from many countries. Most leaders make time to discuss a program, an activity, or a new effort at evangelizing and discipling the region in question. But if you try to gather a group to sit back and reflect—to consider the basis for those activities—you may, like I have in the past, find yourself sitting almost alone in the designated gathering place.

In comparison, I recently attended a week-long conference in which I was assigned to a table of six individuals of various ages and nationalities, one of four such tables in a group of about twenty-five people. I was amazingly refreshed as over the course of a week we spent long hours together looking afresh at one of the Gospels, learning again how people became followers of Jesus and, in turn, "fishers of men." And yet I will admit that if I had known in advance that such group Bible study was to be the emphasis of the week, I might not have chosen to attend.

As I write this book I am concerned that too often we enter into mission and evangelism without really thinking through our understanding of conversion. We want people to come to faith in Jesus Christ, but do we ever make an effort to think outside of the theological frameworks we (spiritually) grew

up in? Do we ever at least *try* to look at the issues through someone else's cultural eyeglasses? Perhaps such reflection could lead us to new, creative modes of encounter with those who are not yet followers of Jesus Christ—without being tied down by technique and program. Perhaps it would allow us to better understand those who follow Jesus in ways different from our own, whose journey is quite distinct from ours, or who “fish for men” using a different kind of net or fishing pole than we know how to use.

This book draws on my experience, first as a missionary's son and then as a missionary myself, in South America, North America, Europe, and the Mediterranean. It is developed from my observations of the peoples of, and God's work in, dozens of countries in most corners of the globe. My hope is that this book, wherever you read it and whatever your national origin, will help you to think again about conversion, to reflect on the wonder of God's grace, and to recognize some dimensions of conversion you had not considered before. In turn, my desire is that those new insights will help to draw you closer to God, make you more understanding of others, and enable you to be more fruitful in your service.

Since my hope is that many types of people from many parts of the world will discover this book, perhaps you have not yet come to the kind of faith and experience I describe in these pages. If so, may God use these words to draw you closer to that life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ.

I take responsibility for what I have written, recognizing that I am a learner still “in process.” I have tried to adequately reference those on whose ideas I am building. My father, J. Harold Greenlee; my sister, Lois Stück; and my friend, Greg

Kernaghan, assisted me in early editing and the presentation of some ideas. Finally, my thanks to Volney James, Angela Lewis, Andy Sloan, Valerie Crawford, and the rest of the team at Authentic for their assistance in making this book a reality.

1

STARTING THE JOURNEY

I know when I came to faith in Christ. I can remember the date, can tell you the time, and could take you to the spot where I repented of my sins and trusted in Jesus Christ as my Savior.

The memory is richly alive of that Sunday evening in February 1964 in a small town in the southeastern United States. I was sitting a bit down the pew from my parents and sisters in the Wilmore Methodist Church. I cannot remember anything of the message, just the knot in my stomach as I realized I had to do *something* when Billy Graham Association evangelist Howard O. Jones gave the invitation.

Somehow I got to my feet, wiggled through the crowd, and made my way close to the already-crowded altar rail. I knew what to do, and by the time my mother caught up and asked if she could pray with me, I could tell her, “It’s already taken care of.”

At about 8:30 p.m. on Sunday, February 16, 1964, I came to faith in Christ.

But, in fact, if I refer to my “coming to faith in Christ,” I would need to take you to several places and times and introduce you to many people. I am forever grateful to Dr. Jones for his message that night—whatever he said, it got through to a six-year-old! But in a sense he was just picking the fruit of the seed long ago planted then watered by my parents, Sunday school and vacation Bible school teachers, and others.

HOW DO PEOPLE COME TO FAITH?

How did *you* come to faith? Or perhaps better, where are you on the journey of coming to and growing in faith?

Many of us remember a specific event, even if not as dramatic as Paul’s experience on the Damascus road. But not everyone fits that pattern.

Richard Peace, in *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve*,¹ walks the reader through the disciples’ three-year “coming to faith” process recorded in Mark’s Gospel. They grew in understanding and belief in Jesus as teacher, prophet, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of David, and Son of God. But unlike my Sunday evening church experience, it is hard to say when the Twelve were “born again” or “accepted Christ.”

Recently I spoke with Muhammad, a man whose story has parallels to the Twelve: he and they were raised to believe in one God yet had a life-changing encounter with the

Son of God. Muhammad lives in an Asian country where both Christians and Muslims are a small minority of the national population.

There is no doubt today that Muhammad is born again, firm in his faith. There is also no doubt that five years earlier he not only had no such faith but was opposed to Christ and Christianity. Attracted to a young lady (not to Jesus!), he attended a Christmas program, even though he despised the church. The words of the song “Immanuel, God with Us” snagged his heart like a fishhook. Later, a prophetic word from a foreign pastor caused him to begin turning to and seeking Jesus. Months later he came to understand more about forgiveness of sins and that Jesus is the Son of God. His change of heart came ahead of his growth in knowledge.

When was this young man born again? I don’t know, and I don’t think Muhammad knows either. He has come to faith, but it is hard to identify a precise point when he was “converted.”

HOW WE UNDERSTAND CONVERSION MATTERS

Why does our understanding of the timing and process of conversion matter? Richard Peace points out that “how we conceive of conversion determines how we do evangelism.”²

The pastor who spoke the prophetic word to Muhammad had, in other meetings held at that time, called people to repent and believe—now! Just as I am thankful for Howard Jones’ evangelistic call back in February 1964, there are many in Muhammad’s city who are eternally grateful for the direct

challenge from the pastor who visited their country. They, and I, rejoice that someone called us to come to a specific point of conversion, without delay.

In dealing with Muhammad, though, the pastor was discerning enough to see that the fruit was not yet ripe and wise enough not to try to pick it while green. In many cases, at least in non-Western settings, people will “pray to receive Christ” when in fact all they are doing is being polite, honoring their guests by going along with their wishes.

Muhammad, no friend then of Christians, says he would have been turned away by such a rushed or confrontational approach. I wonder, would Peter have turned back had Jesus’ first words been “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27) rather than “Come, follow me” (Mark 1:17)?

THINKING AGAIN ABOUT CONVERSION

If the cross is the center of history, conversion is the core of Christian experience. On the one hand defined simply in terms of grace and faith (Ephesians 2:8–9), conversion is also a concept drawing out cultural, social, spiritual, and political complexities. Because of these complex factors, although there is only one cross (Colossians 2:13–15) and only one way to God (John 14:6), the ways conversion is worked out—the journeys of individual followers of Christ—are many.

In the pages that follow, I invite you to think again with me about conversion. Few readers will agree with every point I make or appreciate each insight. Many will think of things I have failed to include. Some will in fact object to the very

word *conversion*. I recognize that it has become a dirty word in some contexts, stained by association with colonialism, extraction of new believers from their society, culture change, and force—a word that some say should be eliminated from our missiological vocabulary. I respect these concerns, especially when they are held by people in places where “anti-conversion laws” are a serious threat and where those who follow and serve Christ are under great pressure. I myself avoid speaking of “converting someone” or “converts from another religion,” expressions that, to me, *do* tend to carry those negatives nuances.

Many, though, have thought long and hard in search of a better word in the English language (and other languages) to describe this process and event of coming to faith in Christ. So far, I have not heard any single term that conveys the richness of meaning carried by the ten letters of *conversion*. Therefore, in this volume in general I echo Andrew Walls’ use of the term to refer to “the most elemental feature of the word . . . the idea of turning . . . the specifically Christian understanding of the response to God’s saving activity.”³

Conversion is a journey, a long road on a narrow way. Let’s get started!

2

INSIDE OUT OR HEADING HOME?

In the early days of Operation Mobilization's ministry through its ship *Doulos*, "Hans," from northern Europe, was the supervisor of "Ray," from Southeast Asia. Ray's task was to serve customers on the ship's large bookfair and make sure his shelves were stocked and in order; Hans oversaw the shift of workers to which Ray belonged.

As I recall the incident, Hans dropped in to visit the ship's director one day. "I don't think Ray can be a Christian," he eventually said. "He spends so much time talking to people that he rarely has his shelves stocked and in order."

Shortly after that, Ray came for an appointment unaware of Hans' earlier visit. "There is no way that Hans is a Christian!" he insisted to the director. "All he cares about is work and schedules, not about spending time with people."

BOUNDED-SET CHRISTIANITY

*One door and only one,
and yet its sides are two.*

*I'm on the inside;
on which side are you?*

As in that old Sunday school song, we often view conversion as getting inside the door, passing a barrier between being non-Christian and Christian. However, is there a more helpful way to view conversion, a model that helps us better understand what happens when we come to faith in Christ?

Borrowing from mathematics, Paul Hiebert describes this inside versus outside way of thinking as a bounded set.¹ Bounded sets are defined by their intrinsic characteristics. My wife buys apples and bananas, but hybrid “appanas” don’t exist. There are exactly eleven whole numbers including and between 0 and 10; 2 and 7 are in, -2 and 43 are out.

With bounded sets it is fairly easy to determine insiders from outsiders, at least if we know the rules and definitions well enough. I can look at the colors of football players’ uniforms and tell which men belong to “my” team. An immigration inspector at the airport quickly determines from a glance at the cover of my passport if I have the right to enter through the “citizens” line or if I need to go through the “foreigners” line.

As Hiebert points out, bounded-set thinking has greatly influenced the church’s understanding of “being Christian.”

None of us likes to admit to prejudice or judging by externals, but probably all of us fall prey to this sin from time to

time. Sometimes it stems from intercultural misunderstandings. Such was the case of Hans and Ray, the unhappy co-workers on the *Doulos*. The differing boundaries that these two men used to define “Christian” were strongly influenced by their cultural values on task and people orientations, limits they fortunately were able to learn to leave behind.

How are we influenced by bounded-set values? We may look at what beverages a person drinks, what kind of clothes she wears, the music he prefers, the political parties they support, and other patterns of behavior, and then subtly pass judgment on whether or not we think they are “saved.” Beyond deciding whether or not we think people are genuinely converted, how soon we think it is appropriate to baptize them, what we teach them, and how we define “church” are all influenced by an “I’m on the inside; . . . Are you?” way of looking at things.

While we profess that salvation is by grace, our evangelism and discipleship often focus on developing the right kind of behavior and reproducing the accepted thinking—that is, the teachings that set us apart from other churches. In one Southeast Asian nation I was told of the surprise created when a leading politician’s wife (assumed to be of the majority, non-Christian faith) was observed to publicly pray *not* with her hands apart, cupped upward, but with her hands folded together in front of her—the *Christian* way to pray!

Even if we boldly declare that salvation is by grace alone, too many of us fall prey to trying to live out our faith by works. In William Hendricks’ revealing study of people leaving the North American church, one typical former churchgoer stated, “Almost any evangelical church worth anything will

teach that salvation is by grace. But after somebody accepts grace, then grace is virtually forgotten, and the Christian life becomes some combination of faith and works.” Hendricks continues, “Story after story bore this out. . . . Perhaps the greatest tragedy was that a system promising forgiveness to people and freedom from guilt ended up making so many of them feel guilty. That, in turn, led to chronic legalism.”²

Behavior *does* matter; being forgiven is not a license to sin (Romans 6:1–2). But we live godly lives and avoid certain kinds of behavior not *to make us* followers of Jesus, not to *become* saved, but *because* we are saved, *because* we are “in Christ.” Grace is a “centered set” concept—a concept centered on relationship with Jesus.

Granted, Jesus himself seemed to use this sort of boundary image in describing the sheep pen (John 10:1–18). He also speaks of entering through the narrow door (Luke 13:22–30) or the narrow gate (Matthew 7:13–14). But we need to remember that the purpose of the gate was to mark the entry to the road. While the travelers in *Pilgrim’s Progress* would remind us of the importance of staying within the boundaries of the path, the key point is that the path points somewhere, the journey has a destination.

CHRISTIANITY CENTERED ON JESUS

Jesus’ words about the sheepfold can be seen from a different perspective. Rather than position, the emphasis is on relationship: not *where* the sheep are, but *whose* the sheep are.

Whether safe and asleep in the pen or far away and in danger on the mountain (Matthew 18:12), the sheep are *his*.

Paul Hiebert defines this kind of thinking as “centered sets.” In mathematics, we might have a set of numbers, such as 5, 10, 15, 20, etc.—numbers related by being multiples of 5. “Cousins” are people who share the same grandparents. “Real Madrid fans” are scattered around the globe but related by their passion, in varying degrees, for a specific Spanish soccer club.

In a centered-set view of Christianity, relationship and direction are key. A great scholar may know volumes about Jesus but have his back turned on the cross. Young Muhammad, mentioned in the first chapter, knew very little about Jesus but had fallen in love with, had centered his life on, Immanuel—“God with us.”

When were Peter and the other disciples “born again”? Was it when someone explained “the plan of salvation” to them and they “prayed the sinner’s prayer”? Or was it when they left their nets and tax tables to follow the Jesus they hardly knew? Or was it later, when Peter made his “Great Confession” (Matthew 16:16)? Was it only after hearing Cleopas’ Emmaus Road story, when the Old Testament Scriptures suddenly began to make sense (Luke 24:13–35)? Or did it only take place when Jesus appeared and “opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:36–49)?

I am convinced that the key question is not *how much* we know but *who* we know. What counts is not being inside certain boundaries of knowledge and behavior, but—by faith—being pointed toward Christ.

Let's be clear: being pointed toward Jesus is not the end goal. Centered-set Christianity focuses on *turning toward*, then *movement toward*, the center. But the order of events in this Christ-centered movement may differ among those who follow him. In hearing several testimonies of people who have turned to Christ from non-Christian religions, I have been struck by the variety of sequences of such key steps as coming to believe in the existence of one God, believing that Jesus is the Son of God, recognizing the need to repent of sin, or simply falling in love with the person of Jesus Christ.

Bounded-set thinking comes easily for most of us: it fits our desire for order and our tendency to put people in boxes, including a boxed-in Christianity. Centered-set thinking may be more difficult, and, as is true of any model, it does not give us all the answers. I believe that a centered-set understanding of conversion is more biblical than the boundary approach. Both, by the way, affirm the importance of truth. We turn to a real Jesus who lived a real, historical life.

CENTERED SETS AND EVANGELISM

Church and mission organization partnerships have blossomed in recent years. One regional group I was involved in for several years grew from a handful of ministries interested in improving follow-up of radio programs and Bible correspondence courses to a diverse, fruitful network of dozens of national churches and international ministries. Most participants in such partnerships would agree that cooperation in evangelism comes easier than in forming and developing churches. Unity in evangelism, on drawing people to Christ,

is not nearly as difficult to find as cooperation in church planting, where we are more likely to disagree on issues with immediate, visible differences—for example, how and who to baptize or how the gifts of the Holy Spirit are exhibited in our worship.

But even when it comes to evangelism, a bounded-set mentality can box us in.

A few years ago a colleague in North Africa rejoiced when a friend turned to Christ. Someone in another organization, though, had a different understanding. So this second person found the opportunity to pray with the North African “to receive Christ” according to *his* rules, and then made it known that he was one of “his” converts!

In a church leadership meeting, one member expressed concern about some who regularly attend worship services but had not “prayed to receive Christ.” I asked whether these people *know* Christ. The questioner seemed puzzled. How could they *know* Christ if they had not prayed to receive him? As others joined in, the discussion digressed, I am afraid, into a call that “the gospel be proclaimed” every week with “an invitation to receive Christ.”

The intention was good, but I question the prescribed method. (Please do not misunderstand—I rejoice when the gospel is effectively proclaimed. As a child I put my faith in Christ as I knelt near the front of a church after an evangelist’s “altar call,” and when appropriate I make such an appeal at the end of my preaching today.) My concern is that although we run the risk of missing someone for whom today *is* the last day, a mechanistic, every-time-we-meet, bounded-set approach to gospel “invitations” seems almost certain to push away many

more (youth especially, my teenage children remind me) who tire of repetitive, ritualistic evangelistic appeals.

We also run the danger of deceiving ourselves. Whether Jerusalem tour guides or Russian prison inmates, I have heard countless stories of people, even entire prisons or schools, “praying to receive Christ”—but what really happened? Too often the fledgling foreign evangelist “led someone to Christ” who was only repeating words as a sign of politeness or, worse, to build a relationship that might lead to a visa to Europe or the United States or some other personal advantage.

I am very much in favor of “praying to receive Christ.” But beyond the call to repentance and belief, I do not see the New Testament giving us a single, prescribed method for turning to Christ. For example, can we identify at what point in Acts 10 Cornelius and his household “got saved”? Some might argue it was at the point the Holy Spirit came on them (v. 44), but perhaps it was at some undefined earlier time (see v. 2) when he and his family began to devoutly fear God. The fact that it was as Peter “began to speak” (Acts 11:15) that the Holy Spirit came on them, and *not* after hearing and considering a lengthy presentation of the gospel, suggests that the message resonated with an inward preparation—if not also an inward turning—that had already taken place.

The point is, we don’t know exactly when nor how Cornelius and his family and close friends first turned to Christ, when they first were set right with God. But we know that by the end of Acts 10 they had moved from being devout God-fearers to being filled with the Holy Spirit, from limited understanding of the facts of the gospel message to a more complete knowledge of God’s grace.

Going back to my friends in church who have not “prayed the prayer,” to be quite honest I am not sure where they stand before God. I want them to know Christ, to be in Christ, to have the assurance of eternal life. But I have far greater assurance regarding them than I do those who—at times with great fanfare and all-church rejoicing—have “prayed the prayer” but today are nowhere to be found. Even if you, I, and many others entered onto the way of life by “praying to receive Christ,” the key question is not if they have crossed that particular boundary but if by faith they *are* centered on Jesus, are *in* Christ (Romans 8:1; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Since, as Richard Peace observes, how we understand conversion affects how we do evangelism, a centered-set understanding will lead to a different style of evangelism than a bounded-set theology of conversion. This made a significant difference in one ministry setting in which I participated.

In 1986 Operation Mobilization’s ship *Doulos* visited ports along the West African coast. Recently married and having worked for two years in the head office, I read with joy of the strong evangelistic emphasis—with thousands “praying to receive Christ” after evangelistic rallies and open-air preaching, many of the “converts” filling out a decision card. I trust that some of those people were sincere and are following Jesus today; but when, a few years after the ship’s tour, we asked churches in the port cities how many members had come from those ship visits, we could find very few, if any.

Four years later I was responsible for the program and evangelism of OM’s other ship, the *Logos II*, as we called on many of those same ports. Again we emphasized evangelism, and we often asked people to pray to receive Christ as Savior

and for the forgiveness of sins. But we did not write down the names or count the numbers of those who made that initial response; instead, we invited them to a series of three meetings where the gospel was explained in greater depth. At the end of the three nights, those interested were invited to a further series of Bible studies that eventually led to participation in a church.

From this tour of West Africa we later heard of ten here, fifteen or twenty there, who were faithfully continuing in a church, following Christ. What was the underlying difference in strategy?

Late in life John Wesley stressed the importance of training and connecting those who were “awakened,” hesitating to preach only once in a town for fear of doing more harm than good. On a tour of Wales in 1763, he wrote in his journal:

I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been for these twenty years all over Pembrokehire! But no regular societies, no discipline, no order of connexion; and the consequence is that nine in ten of the once-awakened are now faster asleep than ever.³

Wesley’s emphasis, and ours two centuries later, was not on getting people to cross a boundary we had defined but to come into a lasting, saving relationship with Christ, which could best be fostered in relationship with other Christians. That underlying difference in how we understood conversion *did* affect how we did evangelism, with eternal fruit a result.

A LIFE CENTERED ON CHRIST

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

It was the early days for the Christian church. Paul and Barnabas had finished their first preaching tour of what today we call south-central Turkey. Many had turned to faith in Christ in Lystra, Derbe, and Antioch of Pisidia, but false teachers had come in—men who apparently accepted that Gentiles could become part of the family of believers but insisted that they must fulfill the Old Testament law.

“Anathema!” was Paul’s powerful reply. “Let me, let anyone be cursed rather than preach a different gospel than the one I first proclaimed to you, the gospel revealed to me and confirmed by Peter and James in Jerusalem. Salvation is not something we earn, not a result of keeping the law—but a gift.”

Paul’s message was so strong in its emphasis on freedom and grace that some accused him of proclaiming licentiousness. “Nonsense!” said Paul. “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13). Later he wrote to the Christians at Rome: “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Romans 6:1–2).

Drawing his letter to the Galatians to a close, Paul describes a list of “acts of the sinful nature” (Galatians 5:19–21). This taxonomy of sin describes the behavior, the specific

actions, of people outside God's kingdom. By comparison, he gives no list of acts that describe the behavior of Christians. Instead, the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22–23) consists of character qualities that underlie godly behavior.

Turning to Jesus—the initial coming to faith in Christ—is vital. Like Paul, for some it may take place in a specific, dramatic moment; for others, like Peter and Cornelius, the precise time may not be known even if such people can say with certainty that although once they did not believe, now they do. But in the ongoing process of conversion, how does Jesus remain the center, the focus, the goal? This happens when he becomes not only the center toward which we are pointed but takes over the center of our lives. As Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).