

Is Conversion a Four-Letter Word?

[Re-imagining Evangelism for Our Times]

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PART I

Introduction

When I mention the word *conversion* to any group of people, it always elicits a mixed reaction. There are some people who get excited because they have seen the transformation that comes through Christ. But, for an increasing number of people today, including people in the congregations I serve, *conversion* has become a four-letter word.

When I mention this word and ask them to share with me the first words that come to their mind, the most common responses are negative – argumentative, intolerant, arrogant, manipulative – the same words used to describe a *bad* used-car salesman. As a result, many Christians have shied away from evangelism and have formed negative perceptions of conversion.

Other Christians consider their faith to be real but private. For them, the gospel is a transaction that took place when they accepted Jesus' death as a payment for their entrance into Heaven and has been reduced to a private affair between themselves and God. In turn, this reductionist view of the gospel becomes irrelevant to the world around them in light of the real problems we face, whether it be poverty, senseless violence, ecological disasters, or the breakup of families. In time, these people become "ashamed" of the gospel because it is not big enough for these problems. Both the pushy person as well as the person whose faith is private are unknowingly under the spell of modernity.

But I have also had numerous conversations with Christians I serve that go something like this: “I don’t know why Christians always try to convert others. I mean, I believe in Jesus, but who am I to think that I need to convert the little Muslim girl in Indonesia? I hate it when Christians think they have to convert everybody. I’ve met many Muslims who are much more loving and devoted to God than many Christians I know.”¹

These people remind me of the Crusades and the war that Bush (supposedly under God’s approval) initiated. Is the gospel of mercy and grace simply a “mask concealing a political grab for domination and control” (Brownson in Hunsberger 1996:229)? Are our only options to adopt a “vicious relativism”² or submit to a tolerant syncretism? This would be the thought of some who live under a certain understanding of post-modernity.

This thesis posits that both modernity and post-modernity have contributed to conversion being perceived as a four-letter word. However, as we re-evaluate the nature of conversion and the practice of evangelism, Christ-followers will be motivated to re-engage in God’s mission with a new sense of vigor. I plan to accomplish this with the help of various authors, lecture notes, conversations, and articles. So let’s start the journey.

¹ These words are not from one person, but rather a collective representation of what I hear on the streets and within our congregation.

² A term used by Stanley Hauerwas in *A Community of Character*

PART II – How Modernity and Postmodernity Affect People’s View of Conversion

Ivan Illich was once asked what is the most revolutionary way to change a society. Is it violent revolution or is it gradual reform? He gave a careful answer. Neither. If you want to change society, then you must tell an alternative story, he concluded.³ (Frost and Hirsch 2003:33)

How Modernity Affects People’s View of Conversion

So how does modernity affect people’s view of conversion? As Toulmin shares in *Cosmopolis*, there were four distinct significant shifts in the 17th Century, that, when taken collectively, exceeded what any one of them would have produced themselves to help shape modernity’s story. These four changes of mind were from oral to written, local to general, particular to universal, and timely to timeless.

(Toulmin 1990:34)

Thus the idea of timeless, universal truth was in the making. And when the scientific method was made central and autonomous reason supreme, the idea of “objective” universal truth was born. Now those who are steeped in modernity’s story make the case that “one can only be said to know ‘truly’ if one knows ‘objectively’” (Smith 2006:43). But, when Christians adopt this view and engage in evangelism to convert others, they tend to come across as *bad* car salesmen. They assume they have objective truth, (not open to interpretation) and everyone else has subjective truth. As a result they emphasize evidential apologetics and try to *argue* people into the faith. More than that, as Smith says, “To assert that our interpretation is not an interpretation but objectively true often translates into the

³ This quote is by Tim Costello and found in *The Shaping of Things to Come* by Frost and Hirsch.

worst kinds of imperial and colonial agendas, even within a pluralistic culture” (Smith 2006:51).

For Christians who have bought into modernity, the gospel becomes something to argue about instead of something to be entered into, embodied, and lived out. And as Fitch said, “When knowledge is viewed as universal fact it must be proved, but when knowledge is viewed as story, it is proclaimed”⁴ (Fitch 2008: Gospel Lecture). This focus on reasoning has also contributed to the idea that conversion is just a matter of mental assent of certain doctrines, which has often resulted in people “believing” the right things without experiencing life change.

Modernity’s focus on autonomous reason and empirical evidence – that which can be measured and quantified – has resulted “in an unhealthy split between the public and the private realm, between facts and values, between science and religion”⁵ (Brownson in Hunsberger 1996:229). So Christians influenced by modernity’s story consider the good news to be private and not public. As Newbigin states,

The idea that the gospel is addressed only to the individual and that it is only indirectly addressed to societies, nations, and cultures is simply an illusion of our individualistic post-Enlightenment Western culture. Very plainly, when we turn to the Old Testament, we find no such separation of the individual from the society which nurtures and forms him and of which he is a part. (Newbigin 1989:199)

⁴ This was a quote I heard from David Fitch, which was gleaned from James Smith probably on the bottom of page 65 in *Whose Afraid of Postmodernity*. This was confirmed through email with Fitch.

⁵ These words are Brownson’s summary of Lesslie Newbigin’s thoughts in *Foolishness to Greeks and The Gospel is a Pluralist Society*.

A faith that only addresses the forgiveness of sins through the death of Christ on the cross, without addressing systemic injustice, is an inadequate gospel that is often viewed as quite shallow and self-serving to those outside of the faith.

How Modernity Affects the Congregations I Serve

Those who live under the spell of modernity tend to view truth and reality in more black-and-white terms instead of color and often limit “the gospel” to the death of Christ, which gives them access to heaven. It is easy for those who live under the meta-narrative of modernity to slip into the idea that the gospel is a set of objective facts for an individual to “believe” and a sinner’s prayer for individual’s to pray, instead of an invitation to “switch stories”⁶ allowing God’s reality to re-shape them, so that they might partner with Him to bring more of heaven to earth.

The problem I have noticed in the congregations I serve and visit is that when individuals shaped by modernity limit the gospel and/or consider their understanding of the gospel to be the universal timeless “objective” truth, contextualization becomes unnecessary and the gospel becomes a proof text. The idea of objective truth has taken such a hold of some that their view of the gospel cannot be questioned or examined. The obvious implications for those who hold this viewpoint are that humility goes out the window and conversation is inessential. It

⁶ Brueggeman in *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* says, “Thus I propose that evangelism is indeed to do again and again what Jews and Christians have always done, to tell ‘the old, old story,’ but to do so in ways that impact every aspect of our contemporary life, public and personal. The stories themselves are vehicles whereby all things are made new.” p. 11 Later he says, “The telling and hearing of this “three storied reality” is an invitation and summons to “switch stories,” and therefore change lives” p. 11.

is just a matter of sharing the “objective” truth. When this view is taken to an extreme, contextualization becomes demonized because the message is transcendent,⁷ and the incarnation is often forgotten.

This narrowing of the gospel tends to separate personal morality from social justice and justification from sanctification in such a way that the good news becomes irrelevant for this life and ineffectual for their own transformation. In other words, the gospel is not experienced as good news, so why share it with others? But modernity is not the only story affecting people’s view of conversion.

How Postmodernity Affects People’s View of Conversion

Postmodernity is showing its influence as well. Postmodernity has done a good job at deconstructing the myth of objectivity, in part with Derrida’s suggestion that the entire world is a text that needs to be interpreted (Smith 2006:54). Yet its emphasis on deconstruction and its suspicion of how the powers that be have used meta-narratives and language games to push its agendas, have caused some Christians to slip into a “vulgar relativism” and/or syncretism.

The prevailing view for many today, including some people in the congregations that I serve, is expressed well by Leslie Newbigin when he says,

To maintain in this new situation, the old missionary attitude (the scandal of exclusivity) is not merely inexcusable but positively dangerous. In a world

⁷ This idea is alive and well in some congregations today. John McArthur, in the Shepherds Conference in 2008, exposed this view quite strongly. And the thousands of pastors in attendance listened to this point with strong amens.

threatened with nuclear war, a world facing a global ecological crises, a world more and more closely bound together in its cultural and economic life, the paramount need is for unity, and an aggressive claim on the part of one of the world's religions to have the truth for all can only be regarded as treason against the human race. Even if it is granted that this exclusive claim has been the claim of the Church through nineteen centuries, we must face the fact that it is not now tenable. (Newbigin 1989:155,156)

Now, while Newbigin does not hold to this view himself, there are many self-identified Christians who do. And while at first glance it seems like a loving approach because we all desire unity and its corresponding blessing – peace – we quickly discover some huge roadblocks. We soon realize as Newbigin aptly points out that “every program of unity has implicit in it some vision of the organizing principle which is to make this unity possible” (Newbigin 1989: 159). Along with this, we start to understand that “we want unity on our terms, and it is our rival programs for unity which tear us apart. As Augustine said, all wars are fought for the sake of peace” (Newbigin 1989:159).

So where does this leave us? We are left in a pluralistic world with various stories, each vying to be the saving narrative. Some stories look to the state as savior; others hold promise in globalization, a new global village that transcends “nation-state-centered pathologies of modern politics” (Cavanaugh 2002:6). Yet, others look to develop a new narrative that somehow becomes the story of stories.

How Postmodernity Affects the Congregations I Serve

The difficulty that this poses in the lives of people in the congregations that I serve is that some people hesitate to fully trust and live in the story of God for fear

that if they do, they will end up like the arrogant bigots who tend to beat people over their heads with their Bibles. They would rather slit their wrists than to become “one of them.”

Yet the problem is that some people unwittingly start to hold onto to a form of what Hauerwas calls “vulgar relativism.” This is

the view that combines a relativistic account of ethical terms with a non-relativistic principle of toleration, fails to deal with real confrontation, since it assumes the impossibility of pointlessness of choosing between options that do not matter to anyone. The problem with vulgar relativism is it treats all moral convictions as if they were only notional commitments. (Hauerwas 1981: 104)

So when one narrative considers human trafficking to be profitable and another story considers it to be diabolical, the vulgar relativist is hung out to dry. Hauerwas concedes to holding to a kind of relativism and does *not* consider it the task of the church to “deny the reality of the multiplicity of stories in the world or to force the many stories into an artificial harmony” (Hauerwas 1981:91). Yet he does not hold to a “vulgar relativism” that would make him incapable of making judgments or unwilling to seek to change someone else’s mind or tradition. (Hauerwas 1981: 101).

So, on the one hand, postmodernity has exposed the myth of objectivity. But on the other hand, those under the influence of postmodernity sometimes fall sway to a relativism that disenables them to take a stand against real evil. Where are we to go from here? Well, Smith notes that scriptures “give us good reason to reject the very notion of objectivity, while at the same time affirming the reality of truth and knowledge” (Smith 2006:43).

PART III – For Those Who Consider Conversion a Four-Letter Word

“The Christian gospel has sometimes been made the tool of an imperialism, and of that we have to repent. But at its heart it is the denial of all imperialisms, for at its center there is the cross where all imperialisms are humbled and we are invited to find the center of human unity in the One who was made nothing so that all might be one. The very heart of the biblical vision for the unity of humankind is that its center is not an imperial power but a slain Lamb.” (Newbigin 1989: 159)

As we have seen, both modernity and postmodernity, in their own ways, have contributed to conversion being a four-letter word by many people today. Yet how we view conversion, the particular lens through which we view it, and the places where we stand to view it are all critical if conversion is to become desirable once again. I believe the issues in this paper are best handled by becoming a language teacher. As a language teacher, I intend to embody the language of faith and teach the grammar of faith to others, whether it’s through public preaching, personal encounters, or group discussions. In this way, whether one is under the spell of modernity or postmodernity, as he learns the language of faith, he will re-engage in God’s mission with a sense of vigor. To get specific on how I would do this, I have provided a couple of personal grammar lessons. Listen in.

Advice for Those Influenced by Modernity

If you have a hard time letting go of the concept of “objective” truth, love to argue people into the faith, and only view the gospel as your ticket to heaven, then I have some good news for you. First, while you may believe that absolute objective truth is what our culture needs, I would suggest that what our culture needs is a church that believes the truth so absolutely that she actually lives it out (Fitch 2007:57). We need to move from an apologetics of argument to an apologetics of

embodiment. We need to move from getting people to assent to four spiritual laws or points-on-a-bridge diagram to inviting people to switch stories, so that they might enter into the kingdom of God in all its glory.

This is a kingdom where the life and teachings of Jesus give discipleship real teeth - where we learn to follow the Liberator of those who have been oppressed by the system, the Lover of those who have been rejected by society, and the Deliverer of those who have been seduced by consumerism. Our story is not just a private one dealing with personal morality but also a public one dealing with powers and principalities that need redemption. Our story is centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Our story is not limited to the death of Christ and the hereafter, but it is also about the kingdom that is at hand. Our story doesn't end with the annihilation of the earth, but a remade heaven and earth. Because of Jesus' resurrection, we can be confident that there will come a day when our cries for justice will be heard, our thirst for God will be quenched, our connection with each other will be deep, and our longing for beauty will be realized. (Wright 2006: 225-240)

The Good News is that "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church." (Moltmann 1977: 64) We are not required to be salesmen for God, but rather journalists, proclaiming to the world that God's reign is at hand (Hunsberger in Hunsberger 1996:23). And as we proclaim this good news, we must embody it as a community. In the words of Bryan Stone, "the church does not really need an evangelistic strategy. The church is the evangelistic strategy." (Stone 2007:15).

Advice for Those Influenced by Postmodernity

If you have a hard time proclaiming this story to a world in need for fear that you might unwittingly be complicit in a scheme to dominate and control, or if when you hear the word *conversion* your stomach does a few flips, then I have this advice for you.

First of all, everybody is part of some narrative. Everyone lives in some story. The question is, why should I live in this one rather than another one? Is there a way to test the narrative of a story to discern if it is one I should fully enter into? Stanley Hauerwas speaks to this. “Just as scientific theories are partially judged by the fruitfulness of the activities they generate, so narratives can and should be judged by the richness of moral character and activity they generate” (Hauerwas 1981:95).

In entering the story of God, we will be able to speak to Caesar’s ideas of peace and justice and stand with the oppressed in love because our truth has some teeth to it. When we commit ourselves to living faithful in this story, we will experience what it means to overcome evil with good. We will taste, feel, and smell its truth and beauty.

One beautiful thing about the story of God is that it is rich with diversity. There are plot and subplots and different ways to view the story, as evidenced in the four gospels themselves. And while the Jesus story is a many-sided tale, we need to learn to tell the story honestly and contextually. To become a Christian is to become so much a part of God’s story as written in the holy text that we become living texts ourselves. Our story is a public one, a political one. It is a story that produces the

fruit of the Spirit and builds a contrast-society as a witness to the world. John Yoder describes the kind of community that God is building through His Spirit:

The political novelty that God brings into the world is a community of those who serve instead of ruling, who suffer instead of inflicting suffering, whose fellowship crosses lines instead of reinforcing them. This new Christian community in which the walls are broken down not by human idealism or democratic legalism but by the work of Christ is not only a vehicle of the gospel or only a fruit of the gospel; it is the good news. It is not merely the agent of mission or the constituency of a mission agency. This is the mission. (Yoder 1998:91)

PART IV

Conclusion

So whether we are more influenced by modernity or postmodernity, we have all been put into one body of which Christ is the head. And in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, slave nor free, modern nor postmodern, for we are all one in Christ. And as the people of God who believe in the goodness of conversion, we are constantly in need of conversion ourselves. For as Wilbert Shenk puts it, "Conversion is needed wherever men and women do not acknowledge the reign of God" (Shenk 2004: lecture). When we recognize that we are all in need of conversion, we become beggars telling other beggars where to find bread. We become journalists instead of salesmen. We see the beauty of conversion because we are constantly experiencing it in our own lives. It is then that we start to understand what G.K. Chesterton meant when he said, "Truth must necessarily be stranger than fiction, for fiction is the creation of the human mind and therefore congenial to it" (Chesterton 2002:99).

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