

## Conversion: A Life Changed (5)

Should a convert to Christ join a church? Some influential voices today say that converts are not automatically required to join the church. The Indian ecumenical leader Dr. M.M. Thomas argues that conversion to Christ does not necessarily imply "conversion to the Christian community."

In much of modern day evangelism, everything seems to revolve around man's personal relationship with God and the salvation of the individual soul. A student of the University of the Philippines, a new convert, asked me if it was really necessary to become a member of a local church. He attended Christian student meetings, but never went to church. This young man is a representative of many who have turned to Christ, but can't see the need for the church. Have even Christians in our time begun to feature Christianity as a "personal religion"? The Bible doesn't teach individualism. People may be disillusioned by the church, but that doesn't give anyone the right to abandon her. When a man becomes a Christian, he is involved in a transfer from one community to another, that is, from fallen humanity, under the wrath of God, to God's new humanity. Christ is never separated from the people that belong to Him. The Lord called His disciples by name, and they were designated to become the new Israel, the nucleus of a new humanity.

The rapidly growing native African churches have often highly symbolical rites through which new believers are incorporated into the church fellowship. In those churches there is a real sense of belonging to a community. New converts need the church.

In this brotherhood in Christ, they need to be instructed in Scripture and led into spiritual growth and maturity as Christ followers.

Is conversion an end in itself? Is it a private experience, without any consequences for political or social concerns? What responsibility should the convert have toward the world? How does the convert show himself to be a recruit of Jesus in his daily life?

Conversion leads to a life lived before the Lord, according to His Word. A Christian cannot regard practical life as something independent from religious life. He cannot withdraw himself from the world. He desires to have all areas of life brought under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. A converted man is sent into the same old world out of which he came, but as a new man, with new standards, new ambitions, new attitudes and a renewed mind (Romans 12:1, 2). John the Baptist, as he stood on Jordan's bank, preached a hard hitting message. He called upon men to turn to God. He spoke of a conversion that had to bring forth fruits that befit repentance (Matthew 3:11). He told the affluent to share their wealth with the less fortunate.

The Bible knows no abstract personal relationship to God. Cheap grace thinks only of one's own personal salvation. Costly grace thinks of the Christian's involvement in the world where it hurts. When William Wilberforce (1759-1833), a British parliamentarian of great ability, became a Christian, his life took a dramatic new turn. He didn't quit

parliament to become an evangelist. He continued to serve in it, and took the leadership in a campaign against Negro slavery. After many seeming failures, in 1807, Wilberforce obtained an act of parliament abolishing the slave trade within the British empire. This courageous Christian was not only concerned about Negro slavery, he also fought for just labour and factory legislation, and many other social causes. He was also generous with his own private funds.

When God comes into a man's life, a change takes place. Shouldn't God make all the difference in the world to us? Of course He should. A converted man seeks to have his life changed according to the dictates of God's Word. Isaac Watts referred to this truth when he wrote:

Thy noblest wonders here we view,  
In souls renewed and sins forgiven:  
Lord, cleanse my sins, my soul renew,  
And make Thy Word my guide to heaven!

Today we witness in our world sinfulness in social orders, the great inequality of wealth and poverty among the haves and have-nots, the harsh treatment of oppressed minorities. Great numbers of persons in our world die each year of starvation. And then there are the sick, who can't afford a doctor, the underpaid, under or unemployed, the children who stare, without hope and with empty eyes, into a world that holds no future for them. And there are the more than two billion who have never heard the Gospel. In this world, the Church cannot divorce herself from her neighbour, shut herself off from the harsh realities of life, and lead an introverted existence. A Christian must practice his orthodoxy. He must be just and merciful in the marketplace, in wage agreements and so forth. The Gospel must go forth in Word and Deed.

Conversion has practical implications. What does the Lord require? "To do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God"(Micah 6:8).