

The Year of the Evangelical

War, religious persecutions, the forward march of communism, theological confusion, famine and secularism are some of the powerful opponents of church growth. Judging by all these adverse conditions, one would think that the church worldwide would be in a state of decline and despair.

The opposite is true! The last two decades has seen world-wide church growth. The sense of defeat that seized the minds of so many in the fifties and sixties is turning towards optimism. Of course, there are many countries closed to the Gospel. Tourists may enter China, but no missionaries. Arabia is hard to penetrate with the Good News. But in numerous countries, great gains have been made. In Brazil, the church is growing rapidly. Much of the growth has taken place since 1946. And there seems to be unlimited opportunity for further vigorous Protestant growth. Between 1936 and 1966, 120,000 Ethiopian pagans became baptized believers in the church founded by the Sudan Interior Mission. And despite the persecutions under the present communist regime, the church is still expanding.

Africa, south of the Sahara, has in the last 40 years become substantially Christian. By the year 2000 A.D., authorities believe there will be 357 million Christians there. During the two decades prior to 1966, 80,000 highlanders became Presbyterian Christians in Taiwan.

Dr. Donald A. McGavran of the School of Mission and Institute of Church Growth, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, claims that in North America the tide is reversing. "For some years," he says, "the major and minor denominations had largely plateaued. Some had declined. But today the attention of local churches, denominational executives, seminary professors, ministers, and lay leaders are increasingly being focused on the un-won multitudes. It is estimated that of 220 million population, 150 million are either very nominal Christians or actual non-Christians." Interest in the Christian faith in North America is growing. Many conversions are reported. Hundreds of public figures in the United States have openly testified of their conversion in recent years. Christian talk shows often feature interviews with converted celebrities. Some of the best known names are Charles Colson, Johnny Cash, Eldridge Cleaver. Time and Newsweek labelled 1976 the "Year of the Evangelical", and "born again" and "conversion" have even become catch phrases. Evangelical para-church movements and churches are thriving.

Are we at the threshold of a great period spiritual revival? Dare we hope so? Is our optimism justified? To answer these questions we have to ask ourselves: What is conversion? Is it a sense of psychological release, which follows a period of tension and struggle? Is it a change from one religion to another or from one political party to another? Is conversion a private religious experience, unrelated to the rest of life? What happens when you are converted? What are the marks of a genuinely Christian conversion?

After a recent survey Gallup made the issue clear: "Religion is increasing its influence on society but morality is losing its influence. The secular world would seem to offer abundant evidence that religion is not greatly affecting our lives." How can one tell the difference between the real and the superficial? These questions are important as conversion is a vital doctrine of Biblical Christianity.

Conversion is a soundly Biblical term. But the conversion is also known outside the Christian faith. Buddha's conversion is described. He led a carefree and worldly life until he was confronted by the ugly reality of suffering mankind. And this made such a deep impression upon him that it led to a dramatic change in his life. He decided to become a monk. Something similar can be told of Mohammed. After a special "revelation" from God, he came to a point in life, which he himself saw as his conversion. His changed life and new teaching made a world-wide impact.

The old and new religious movements, ranging from Jehovah's Witnesses to Soka, Gakkai, call for conversion. They all preach a message which requires a new beginning. The entrance into the movement and the continuation therein, entails significant change in allegiance, belief and life-style.

Conversion in the Biblical context has a unique dimension. Its object is not a new allegiance to a system, a religious movement or an ideology. Its object is none other than Jesus Christ Himself, the son of the ever living personal God. It is man's response to the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, and without that response no one can enter into the Kingdom of God.

Continued

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