CONVERSION IN RETROSPECT

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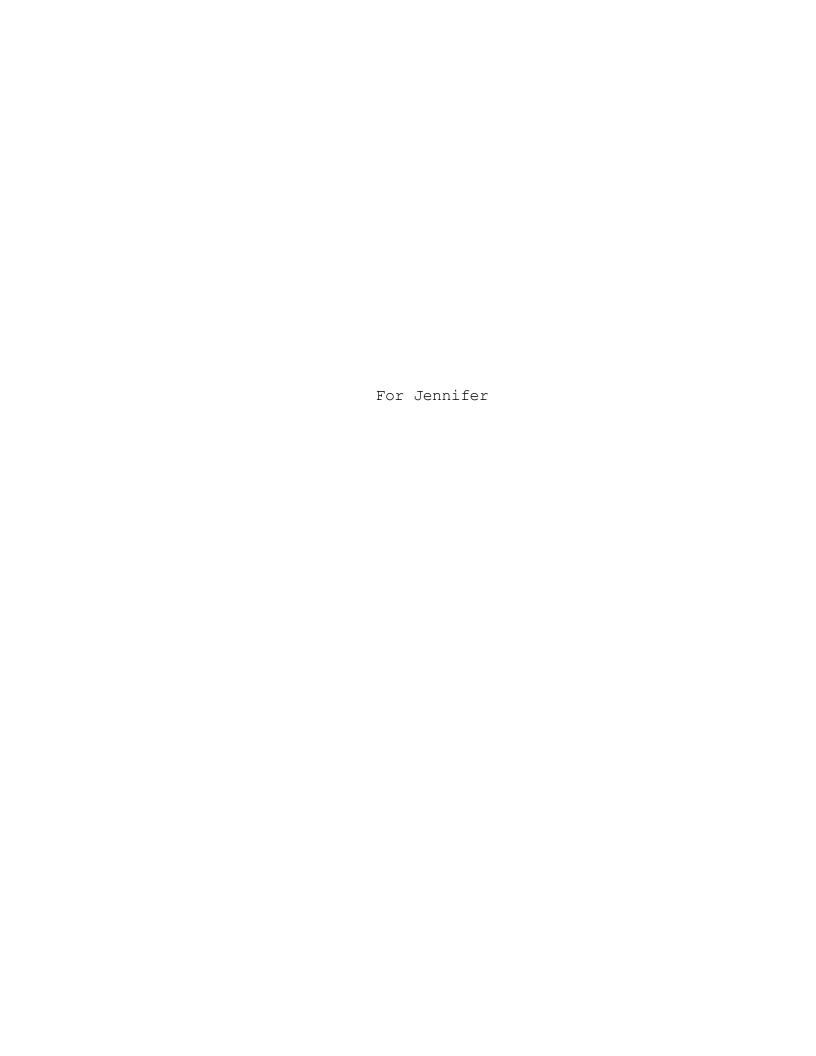
Doctor of Ministry

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by

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CHAPTER ONE

TALKING ABOUT CONVERSION

I.   INTRODUCTION

Six miles from my church stands a large church building, which houses an equally large Presbyterian congregation. Its membership is three times ours. As I was organizing the adult class project, described later in this report, I phoned one of the pastors of this large Presbyterian congregation. I wanted from him the name of one of his congregants who could attend our first class session and share an account of his or her experience of religious conversion. Hearing this request, the pastor was silent for several seconds. "No one comes to mind," he finally replied. "I could try to rearrange my schedule and come myself..."

The phone conversation continued for twenty minutes. In that time the pastor could not recall a single parishioner from his church who might have been able to share a conversion experience.

This little exchange became more significant in my mind when in the fourth class session I asked the twenty-two member group how many of them had, at some time, walked forward in response to an "altar call" or similar

evangelistic invitation. Ten hands went up. Admittedly, most of these "conversions" the group told me were under social pressure from parents or zealous ministers. Nevertheless, many in my class had personal experience with the revivalistic tradition.

More significantly, as the course progressed, it became clear that most participants had enjoyed a rich personal tapestry of encounters with God. We heard stories of experiences that I would certainly describe as "conversions." Class members described prayers answered and not answered. They spoke of pilgrimages from one congregation to another, seasons of spiritual dryness, sojourns in the far country, and even "dark nights of the soul."

The apparent difference in the two congregations' spiritual depth becomes increasingly curious when I consider that they are--except for size--much alike in theology, sociology, and leadership. Why then could I locate several conversions in a twenty-two-member group while my peer could not remember one among a thousand Presbyterians?

Because I asked.

In other words, the seeming scarcity of personal encounters with God in the larger congregation is a function of the conversation among its members. It is not a result of spiritual shallowness or pastoral ineptness. The minister and members may not have created many occasions to share with

one another their experiences with God. As Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks have written recently:

> Protestants still have profound experiences of God's grace and presence. However, congregations frequently inhibit discussion of such depth encounters because they are considered too private or too personal to be held in common.[1]

We haven't always been shy about our spiritual lives. One way to measure how much our discussion of encounter has drained away in mainline Protestant churches is to recall the 17th century controversy in New England's Reformed churches over the necessity of an experience of regeneration--a conversion--as prerequisite for full communicant membership. Even the "half-way" compromise, which gained popularity after 1657, was not able to alter the general assumption in churches that a clear, reportable encounter with God's effectual calling was normative for church membership.[2] In other words, pastors then would be hard put to find a member who had not undergone a conversion experience.

II. TALKING ABOUT SPIRITUAL ENCOUNTER

Reluctance to talk about conversion in many Presbyterian Churches is rooted in our more general reluctance to speak of any sort of spiritual encounter. Decision-making groups like Presbyterian sessions typically rely far more on business insights than prayer for guidance in directing a church's

affairs. Congregations choose elders with an eye for their business acumen. This results in leadership dedicated to efficiency and institutional success with little reference to God's guidance. Business-like leadership, of course, is not inherently unspiritual. My concern rather is with churches' uncritical and extensive reliance on secular techniques and values.

This reliance sets a tone that ripples throughout the church's program. When a congregation's core leadership, including pastors, is not relating the Scriptures and theological tradition (not to mention its sense of the Spirit's urges) to its routine decisions, then the congregation's spiritual vitality will suffer. "Recruiting volunteers" replaces hearing God's summons to service. Survival goals replace a vision for participating in Christ's contemporary ministry. "Fund raising" replaces stewardship of gifts. Shorn of its spiritual vocabulary, church leadership negotiates the up-building of the congregation in terms belonging to a realm essentially unlike itself. God's encounter with God's people in turn becomes a church's silent reality rather than its central joy.

Secular values have similarly shaped our practice of pastoral care. Most of my pastoral conversations, especially in formal counseling sessions, do not ponder God's activity in a parishioner's life. Only infrequently through much of

my ministry have I talked in pastoral conversations about providence, guidance, vocation, or Christian ethics, which are all crucial for anyone concerned to live as Christ's disciple. My language in pastoral care has been that of the therapist. It has seemed to me useful to draw on the insights and vocabulary of Transactional Analysis, Gestalt techniques, or Family Systems therapy in helping struggling parishioners. This easy borrowing of popular psychological language displaces opportunity to relate God's presence to a real, complex situation. Instead of supporting laypeople in articulating and interpreting their relationship with God-- the prime occasion to develop faith maturity--I have offered help in the language of the therapeutic world. Eugene Peterson speaks of the contemporary pastor's abandonment of the faith's resources in his or her work of nurture:

> ...When I get up on Monday to face a week of parish routine I am handed books by Sigmund Freud and Abraham Maslow, Marshall McLuhan and Talcott Par- sons, John Kenneth Galbraith and Lewis Mumford. It is a literature of humanism and technology. The pulpit is grounded in the prophetic and kerygmatic traditions but the church office is organized around IBM machines. The act of teaching is honed on biblical insights derived from historical, gram- matical, form, and redaction criticism while the hospital visit is shaped under the supervision of psychiatrists and physicians.[3]

The Breakdown of Natural Community

I have suggested thus far that Presbyterians and

Mainline Protestants are not only reticent in discussing their experience with conversion, but also in expressing to one another details of their relationship with God. Both kinds of witness--the former a sub-category of the latter--have profound impact on the congregation's nurture of faith in individual believers. This impact we will discuss throughout this report.

Before we turn to this in earnest, it is important to understand one more influence which decreases congregational conversation in liberal Protestant churches; namely, the general loneliness in Western societies. The society-wide breakdown in natural community has had an erosive effect on congregational closeness. It has been lamented by thinkers from M. Scott Peck[4] to Roberta Hestenes of Eastern Baptist College[5] to Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney.[6] If Presbyterians are not present with one another; don't know one another's names, families, and work; if our programs dis-courage talking, then we will certainly not be sharing the tender details of our prayer lives. In mentioning community fragmentation and the loneliness that results, I've opened up a vast and well-studied field. Included in this trend are the changes in family structure, nuclear and extended; work place upheaval and alienation; and anonymous neighborhoods. Much of this is unrelated to the climate of sharing in churches. Some factors, however, *do* touch us within the

church.

The main culprits in my experience include the following. First, high mobility and affluence that have many Presbyterians traveling on weekends. Second, is the more profound mobility of residence relocation. Great numbers of Americans changing their homes for business opportunity or recreation proclaims that relationships are of less importance than success and prosperity. Finally, divorce is a factor in congregational intimacy. While divorce and the spiritual journey that accompanies it sometimes brings new members into our congregations, more often one or both partners in a dissolved marriage leave our fellowship.

I mention these cultural factors not to suggest, *because* community is declining in American culture, that therefore we don't talk about religious experience in church. Rather, I mention them to recognize that when natural community breaks down we simply are left with fewer opportunities to be close in church fellowship.

To illustrate: as I planned the adult class on conversion which I'll later describe, I asked potential members to commit to being present for each of eight sessions. Many were unable to promise such attendance due to Sunday work, vacations, or out-of-town family visits. So, even for Presbyterians committed to talking about conversion, the factors which erode community in general also cut down

opportunities to share spiritual things.

III. WHY MAINLINE PROTESTANTS DON'T DISCUSS SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

We turn now to examining factors within the church which erode our ability and willingness to discuss our spiritual experiences.

Protestant Scholasticism

John Calvin's theology is a complex and nuanced whole which balances God's majesty and otherness with God's self-revelation in the Scriptures and "accommodating" immanence. The reader of Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion and his commentaries is at once impressed both with the rigor of Calvin's ordering of Christian truth and the warmth of the personal, experiential faith which he continually sets forth.

This marriage of intellectual order and personal en-counter began to unravel in Reformed circles in the late 17th century and continued throughout the 18th century. It was during this time that the theological insights generated by the Reformers were increasingly systematized and codified. This was the era of confessional solidification in both the Reformed and Lutheran traditions. This extensive movement has been called Orthodox or Scholastic Protestantism.

For Presbyterians, the Scholastic tradition is retained in several of the historical confessions which compose the

Presbyterian Book of Confessions. Less formally, this tradition's spirit is alive wherever the so-called Princeton Theology retains influence in America. The Princeton Theology is commonly associated with the 19th century leadership of Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, A. A. Hodge, and Benjamin B. Warfield--all Princeton Theological Seminary professors. These influential systemitizers sent into Presbyterian pulpits and schools thousands of adherents. Even today such seminaries as Westminster of Philadelphia, Covenant of St. Louis, Reformed of Jackson, Mississippi, together with individual professors like Roger Nicole of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary or John Gerstner of Pittsburgh Seminary maintain the spirit of Protestant Scholasticism.[7]

This systematizing impulse, with its long tradition in Reformed Churches, has served to articulate the faith's precise nature. Unfortunately, at times it has replaced faith's relational character with an arid orthodoxy. Rationalism in theology fosters both intellectual formalism and religious complacency. In response, some Presbyterians have looked for a warmer, more experiential piety such as that of the revivalistic traditions.[8] The interplay between these poles crops up throughout Presbyterian history. Says Edith Blumhofer:

> Throughout American Presbyterian history debates
> about evangelism helped focus deeply divisive

issues that occasionally led to schism as Presbyterians faced the tension between intellect and emotion, Calvinism and revivalism.[9]

The strong presence of the intellectual or propositional facet of the Gospel has become something of a family characteristic in the Presbyterian household. We honor intellection because of the centrality of God's Word in our theology. But sometimes our honoring of God with our minds eclipses the relational dimension of faith. Thus, ordaining presbyteries test ministerial candidates for orthodoxy, not prayer. Presbyterians comfortably produce exegetes, theologians, and social prophets. Other groups lead the way in evangelism and spirituality. This is not to say that conversation about one's encounter with God is explicitly forbidden. It is not. However, in Presbyterian circles such sharing feels less significant than talk which articulates precise theological positions logically and biblically.

One recent event in the life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will illustrate this. During the first months of 1994, the denomination was embroiled in controversy concerning the ecumenical Re-Imagining Conference which met in Minneapolis in November, 1993 and which, put simply, explored ways that the Christian understanding of God could be expressed in less masculine and culture-bound images. For Presbyterians, it was second nature to approach such questions theologically, defining the borders of orthodoxy

through biblical exegesis, church history, the history of doctrine, social analysis, and so on.

As the denomination's June General Assembly meeting neared, the time when Presbyterians could officially respond to the conference, congregations and pastors were showered with articles and position papers on the controversy. The field of battle seemed to be in the realm of ideas. This pre-General Assembly debating eclipsed any thought that spiritual discernment or reconciliation might be resources for finding our way through the crisis. It is difficult for us to imagine that our General Assembly would resolve this difficulty in the way that the Society of Friends, gathered in 1758, yielded to John Woolman's inspiration concerning slavery.

As it turned out, the crisis was resolved at the annual meeting by a sensible compromise which felt more like a moment of grace than a discovery of the right idea. Following the near-unanimous vote in favor of the reconciling compromise, observers reported that ideological foes spontaneously sang and hugged one another. The crisis was solved through love and reconciliation, not theological precision. The point of this story has to do with the unexpectedness of the grace-filled resolution. It was this non-intellectual solution that the Presbyterians did not seem to foresee.

The attempt here is not to suggest that emotional ardor or even charismatic excitement are absent in Presbyterian churches. Classic controversies such as the Old Side-New Side struggle in Colonial America demonstrate that emotional fervor and spiritual awakening also exist within Presbyterian experience. Certainly emotion and volition join intellection in Presbyterian congregational life today. My desire here, however, is to point out a Presbyterian habit of leading with the mind. We have defined and defended beliefs for our entire history. Presbyterians dwell comfortably in the world of ideas. Intellection comes naturally and spiritual experience feels less significant or even suspect by comparison.

Secularization

The term, "secularization," refers to the profound shift in Western attitudes, values, and beliefs which has been underway at least since the Enlightenment. At that time--the 17th century--thinkers greatly expanded empirical inquiry and reason as the means for uncovering truth about the physical universe. In the following century, the scientific outlook came to be applied to sociology, politics, and even ethics.[10]

One driving force behind advancing secularization is the impressive improvements in life quality which scientific method has brought about. The Twentieth Century has

witnessed a steady march of technical achievements which have left the claims and promise of Christianity standing idly aside. The pace of innovation wrought by human ingenuity has, of late, only been exceeded by the general and uncritical optimism that technology will ultimately solve every problem.

It was against this intellectual background that the ideological underpinnings of constitutional government in the United States were established. This is not to say that the United States is entirely a product of the Enlightenment. Prior to the constitutional period, settlers in America, deeply influenced by the Protestant Reformation, attempted to realize a vision of this land as having a divine commission in the world.[11] In many respects, that vision of America as a Christian nation still lives. Robert Wuthnow in his The Restructuring of American Religion, speaks of competing religious dreams of America. So, America's rich religious heritage is still part of our understanding of our own essence.

Despite the persistence of the religious character in this culture, the long process of secularization has broken down what once was a comprehensive social consensus that a Christian world view and ethic would dominate American thought. At one time, Christianity sustained American culture, ethics, education, and even economic life. Today,

significant sectors of our culture rest on different ideological foundations. Ahlstrom has called the late 20th century, "Post-Puritan America."[12] By this expression he means that the ideological consensus which at one time undergirded American culture has significantly eroded.

Consequently, secularization functions to provide an array of alternative choices and explanations in all areas of American life. The rise of science in this century, for instance, "explains" a whole range of phenomena from the Universe's birth to the origin of human beings. Christianity no longer dominates the conversation about such origins. Secularization has suggested that ethical decision-making need not appeal to Christian values to find correct or appropriate courses of behavior. As a result, Christian faith in America does not enjoy the support of public schools in leading children in prayer or developing their Christian character. Churches can no longer count on businesses or other organizations to accommodate their schedules so not to interfere with worship attendance.

In accordance with its unique history, the United States has experienced secularization in a distinctly American way. Martin Marty has shown that secularization has proceeded differently in America than on the European continent or in England.[13] In Europe, academicians and social thinkers have attacked Christian faith overtly. In England, intellectuals

simply have ignored religion. In America, secularization and religious values co-exist. On one hand, significant numbers of people continue to adhere to inherited beliefs. On the other, secular thinking predominates in many spheres, leaving Christianity to appear less adequate to guide and inform. Thus, government, education, psycho-therapeutic thinking, business, sociology, not to mention the natural sciences are all conducted with little or no reference to Christian faith.

This ironic juxtaposition of advanced secularization and unparalleled church attendance has impact on church life. Untold millions of Americans work all week in businesses, education, or government where secular thinking predominates. This mode of thought does not change when believers go to church on Sunday. Small wonder--as we have observed--that the church governing board is dominated by business techniques and pastoral care is informed by psychological theory. Secularization, in other words, influences the kinds of thinking which laypeople, as well as clergy, understand and revere, even in church.

Secularization has particular impact on Presbyterians. Christians in sectarian traditions have often greeted modern thinking with suspicion. We have been much less defensive. In fact, Presbyterians have tended to feel the full impact of secularization because of our historic openness to new modes of thought. This openness is rooted in the Reformation. It

is of no small significance that Calvin and Zwingli were educated in the humanist traditions of their time. In turn, Calvinists tend to see rigorous thinking as a mode of serving God. Such a tradition prevents Presbyterians from blunting by authoritative fiat secularization's intellectual challenges. Confidence that no genuine intellectual development threatens to dislodge the Gospel's truth, disposes Presbyterians to an openness to all new ideas. While this keeps Presbyterianism current and flexible in changing times, it also imposes the intellectual burden of continually rethinking our theology in light of new understandings. Not surprisingly, some new ideas may not be comfortably incorporated into the thinking and teaching of our churches.

The impact of secularization on Presbyterians goes beyond our practice of accommodating to shifts and advances in thinking. Presbyterians, along with other liberal Christian groups, have even appropriated the techniques and insights of the empirical sciences in the service of the church. The historical-critical movement in biblical exegesis or the innovations in pastoral care and counseling are examples of how we have benefited from the free borrowing of scientific thought modes for Christian purposes.

A further complexity in the secularization process is the popular impression that science and religion are essentially in conflict. Says Diogenes Allen:

> For many people science stands for rationality, evidence, knowledge, enlightenment. Religion, in contrast, stands for backwardness, conservatism, superstition, authoritarianism, and is regarded as the enemy and rival of science. These are extreme characterizations, but however much the extremes are toned down, the general impression is that some hostility, some incompatibility, some rivalry between religion and science exists.[14]

Allen goes on to challenge this assumption, asserting that science and Christianity are in "deep harmony."[15] Nevertheless, it is a commonplace in secularized America that the approach and thought patterns of the scientific world view yield better, more practical knowledge and that talk of faith or religious experience inhabits a lower tier of truthfulness and usefulness.

I have long observed Presbyterians--ministers and laypeople--moving from one psychological, organizational, or intellectual fashion to the next. In my college days the Transactional Analysis movement influenced untold numbers of ministers and laypeople. Later, came the assertiveness and "burn-out" psychologies. Later still, came family systems thinking and the insights of those who deal with addictive disorders.

Our wandering from one emerging fad in the social sciences to the next betrays where Presbyterians look for personal healing and inspiration. It is a clue to the degree that secular schemes, bearing the authority of scientific validation, impress us.

Typical congregations, bouncing from one promising trend to the next, loose appreciation for religious thought in general and religious experience in particular. To speak in a Presbyterian church of one's prayer life, sense of God's presence, conversion, or other spiritual encounter is to risk the embarrassment of being thought naive or sentimental.

Privatization

When Jesus called disciples into communion with himself--the essence of Christian faith--he also called them into community with one another. This was no innovation. The biblical vision of relatedness with God, from the call of Israel to the establishment of the early church, envisioned faith thriving in the context of a society of believers.

This connection between faith and community has been fundamentally ruptured in America today. Some thinkers even talk of a "churchless Christianity" emerging in our culture. Roof and McKinny report that

> the overwhelming majority of the population--inside and outside the churches--holds to strongly individualistic views on religion. In a Gallup poll in 1978, a staggering 81 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement, 'An individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues.' Seventy-eight percent (and 70 percent of churchgoers) said that one can be a 'good' Christian or Jew without attending church or synagogue.[16]

The sweeping devaluation of Christian community--and community in general in our culture--affects the climate of intimacy in our congregations. When congregational life is widely seen as an expendable extra, Christians do not look to their churches not as a wellspring of personal support and unqualified acceptance. Instead, the church is perceived as a dispensary of programs, inspiration, and social contacts. In turn, the amount of investment churchgoers are willing to make in community building is minimized. Thus, for untold numbers of mainline Protestant congregations, the intimacy necessary to discuss members' inner spiritual lives seems less appropriate in church than in, say, the context of a support group or a close friendship. In order to speak of God's grace, a word is necessary about what in life needs grace, namely our brokenness and personal failings. Talk about spiritual journey entails admitting to the part of life which needs to be left behind. Witness to religious conversion entails admission that transformation is necessary and that community is necessary to transformation. Such self-disclosure seems unnecessary, even inappropriate, in church.

The sources of this heightened individualism and privatization of faith are complex. Certainly the traditional disestablishment of religion in America is a starting point. The constitutional guarantee that a person's

religious practice is both voluntary and separated from government interference has lodged the locus of religious authority in the individual. More recently, even America's informal assumption that Christianity has suffered erosion. We are, according to some observers in the midst of a shift away from the "Christendom Paradigm."[17]   No longer does Christian faith literally, go with the territory. No longer does the Church enjoy--even in subtle forms--the endorsement, protection, or coercion of the state.

This shift, in turn, both liberates and tempts the individual believer. It liberates the individual from all establishment coercion in the choice whether and where to go to church. It tempts people, however, to see themselves as the critics and consumers of religious services rather than vital members of transforming fellowship. This trend of making the individual responsible for his or her religious faith has accelerated since the 1960's when social control exerted by families, towns, and traditions has diminished.

Shorn of most community or public endorsement, religion in America can easily be construed as without public importance.[18] As such it has come to occupy the private realm rather than the more revered public realm--the so-called "real world." In this mind set, faith pertains to one's inner life rather than one's entire life. Says Nelson:

> The type of privacy into which American religion
> has drifted is more likely to be one of self-ful-

> fillment: authority is not in God, who comes into a person's life with a mission; it is rooted in a person's psychological needs...The search is not for truth about God but for religious beliefs and practices that help people cope with inner difficulties...This idea of religion's becoming sacred only to oneself is startling, but not too far fetched if we understand how religious authority has shifted, from a conception of God who reveals God's will for the world, to individuals who are concerned primarily for themselves.[19]

Even for Presbyterians--a group traditionally committed to the transformation of culture--matters of faith take their place in the constellation of private convictions. As such, belief resides in the bedroom of life together with the intimacies of relationships, health concerns, money, and political views.

Finally, the privatization and voluntary character of American Religion, Presbyterianism included, seduces laity and clergy alike to understand church belonging as a form of consumption. Marketing terms such as church "shoppers" or "market share" fix in our minds the idea that religious participation resembles a consumer event rather than a relational commitment. The transaction in this marketing mentality is an exchange of religious services for contributions, volunteering, and attendance. Should the services prove inadequate, the religious consumer can take his or her business to one of a variety of eager, competing churches. In this model, church staffs and lay leaders treat parishioners like customers to be wooed. The customer is always

right.   Accordingly, concepts such as church authority or discipline are wholly out of place.

The movement of faith out of the public sphere into the realm of a person's private business has left religious experience as one of those things too personal to talk about. As such, it becomes part of peoples' hidden selves which is covered by the roles and masks of their public selves. Daily, pastors in mainline churches encounter clues about the private reality of parishioners' faith.   One is the fearfulness laypeople have in offering extemporaneous prayers in meetings.   Another is the embarrassment congregants experience over their ignorance of religious things.   Still another is the reluctance churchgoers have in sharing honest doubts or moral struggles with one another.

The following situation illustrates how the private and voluntary nature of faith in Presbyterian circles has impact on congregational intimacy.

In my congregation a young, upscale family of five recently left our church, ostensibly because we didn't have a strong youth program. I telephoned the mother of the house- hold who gleefully declared that their thirteen year old had "found" their new church--a large Southern Baptist Congrega- tion.   Apparently, this daughter had been attending the Baptist's youth fellowship meetings with friends and, on that basis, the family decided to begin attending worship in that

congregation.

Absent from this decision was explicit consideration of theology, relationships with other congregants, other pro-graming, or sense of call to ministry in that particular fellowship. It appears that the twin decisions to leave one community and unite with another were reached much as a dry cleaning company or car rental agency are chosen. As such, it was not beyond a thirteen year old's ability to choose for the entire family.

Implicit in this consumer mode of making such decisions is a devaluing of congregational relationships. When con-gregants' bedrock criterion for participation in church fellowship is perceived personal benefit, rather than a matrix of relationships including the relationship with Christ, then congregational intimacy suffers.

I'm fairly certain that, had this family stayed in our congregation, a very rich dialogue would have developed. I say this because I enjoyed a warm relationship with the father of the household. He was, and is, a skilled business person with exceptional "people skills." In our congregation, he gravitated to leadership on the session and served for a year as chairperson of our Worship Committee.

Late one evening following a meeting, he and I found ourselves alone in my office--too tired to go home. He began talking about what he really thought of Christian faith. His

self-disclosure jolted me because he announced that he totally disbelieved in any transcendent element in the faith.

Why did he come to church? I wondered aloud. He responded with a complicated answer which had to do with participating in our culture's rituals and intellectual underpinnings. His theology was similar to that of the death of God theologians, minus the emphasis on theodicy.

This conversation was the only sharing of any depth which I experienced with any member of that household. In the quiet of my office I found myself trying to articulate for both of us why I believed in God. At the same time, I wondered silently if there were deeper reasons why this young corporate executive and family man gravitated to a church and gave himself generously to its affairs.

What was lost in this family's departure was the conversation which never happened between this parishioner and other thoughtful adults in our congregation. Such intimacy would not only hold promise in evangelizing him, but would challenge our laypeople to rethink and restate their own faith assumptions.

Conclusion

The conversation about our experience of God has been stifled by at least these four factors: 1) the general breakdown of community, 2) the intellectual emphasis in the

Reformed tradition, 3) secularization, and 4) privatization in American religion. In Presbyterian congregations talk of knowing God has drifted into talk of knowing about many things. The experiential character of faith has lost its voice. Additionally, the particular experience of conversion, an uneasy subject for Mainline Protestants because it is essentially spiritual encounter, is made more problematic because of its association with evangelism and revivalism as they have been practiced in the American context. We turn now to this factor as yet another reason why conversion is difficult to discuss in Presbyterian churches.

IV. EVANGELISM AND REVIVALISM

Many "liberal" or mainline Protestants associate conversion with pietistic or revivalistic traditions. Then, because of theological differences with these groups, mainline Protestants neglect exploring the meaning of conversion in their own experience. Presbyterians today can easily develop an impression that their church is not committed to evangelism, or worse, somehow above it. In turn, the fruit of evangelism, conversion, looses significance or seems to be an experience particular to certain groups.

Two false assumptions drive this kind of thinking:

First, that evangelism is somehow not a part or a minor part of the Presbyterian experience, and, second, that conversion takes place only where evangelistic efforts are expended.

The First False Assumption: Evangelism is Not Presbyterian

Presbyterians are and always have been committed to evangelism--sharing the Gospel's glad tidings with neighbors near and far. Despite this commitment, Presbyterians have long found that evangelism collides--or seems to collide-- with other values which we hold dearly. The whole story of this uneasy regard for the task of evangelism is complex, dates back to the Reformation, and is beyond this chapter's scope. It is, however, worth listing several factors that have troubled the relationship between Presbyterians and evangelism recently in the United States.

Evangelism and Theology. A basic problem, one which predates the Civil War in America, is the Presbyterian sensitivity to the competing needs both to evangelize and maintain allegiance to pivotal theological tenets such as predestination and limited atonement. The general situation in America with its expanse of wilderness and variety of immigrant settlers, demanded a simple gospel proclamation which quickly warmed hearts and led to conversion and church membership. This adaptation of mission for the American

experience also led to conflict with Presbyterian immigrants who were committed to the Westminster Confessions' nuanced theology and church discipline. This basic conflict is the essence of many now-famous Presbyterian upheavals including the Adopting Act (1729), the New Side--Old Side tensions, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church's formation, the Plan of Union's failure in 1838, and Charles Finney's withdrawal from the Presbyterian Church.

Evangelism and Polity. Presbyterians also have long struggled with polity questions revolving around appropriate administration of evangelistic work. Para-church organizations such as evangelistic associations, mission societies, or traveling evangelists have generally lacked church discipline and accountability. This, in turn, has regularly alarmed orderly Presbyterians. Further, Presbyterians have long debated whether evangelism is germane to a congregation's life or whether it was best administered by denominational boards. Thus, beginning in the 19th century, Presbyterian evangelism and mission have been hampered by controversy--theological and administrative.

Evangelism and Changes in the 20th Century. In 20th century America, a plethora of factors quietly worked to erode the evangelical character of Presbyterianism. For

example, developments in European biblical theology have pressured Presbyterians to define themselves in the modernist-fundamentalist debate. Once again Presbyterians found themselves in a familiar dilemma--confronting intellectual reasons to examine the very theology which energized evangelism.

Further, the expansionist era for the United States came to a close in the 20th century together with the mentality that Americans needed to impose their culture--including Christianity--on other peoples. This played out in the growing recognition of the legitimacy and faithfulness of indigenous churches in emerging nations.

Further still, growing social problems during the 20th century tended to overshadow the sense of urgency to evangelize. The development of the science of sociology coupled with the insights of theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Lingle increased Presbyterians' awareness of the stake which all people have in social problems. In particular, the Great Depression with its vast unemployment brought social problems into high visibility. More recently, racial tensions and consciousness of race-related problems have grown in America. Observers of the language which Presbyterians have used to describe their outreach have noted a shift away from "evangelism" in favor of the word, "mission."

Evangelism and Pluralism. Finally, the challenge of pluralism since the early 1960's has presented perhaps the most daunting obstacle to evangelism. Ecumenism, which has led Presbyterians to acknowledge the priority of indigenous churches' missions within their own cultures has been stretched to cover other faiths as well. Pluralism challenges Christian evangelism by raising the question whether truth is single or multiple. In view of increasing Christian respect for other world religions, the question follows whether we should evangelize pious non-Christian believers. This question is sharpened by recollection of abuses in our past evangelistic efforts.

Conclusion. Evangelism has long had a way of dwelling in the realm of controversy in Presbyterian circles. In turn, Presbyterians are rarely as zealous as other groups for evangelistic work. And while the long story of this uneasy relationship between Presbyterians and evangelism is usually unknown to laypeople, the sense that evangelism is problematic is not lost on them.

At the first session meeting which convened shortly after my installation as pastor of Central Church, each of the committee chairpersons introduced themselves. When we came to the Evangelism Committee, the chairperson said, "My name is Arlene. I'm the chairperson of the Evangelism

Committee. And I don't knock on doors." That introduction probably represents more Presbyterian history than that elder may have realized.

The Second False Assumption: Conversion Only Occurs as a Result of Evangelism

This brings us to the second false assumption, namely that conversion is wholly tied to evangelistic efforts. The neglect of conversion is one unfortunate result of the Presbyterian tradition's critique of evangelism in America. Beverly Gaventa asserts:

> ...Liberal Christians have avoided the task of understanding and reflecting upon conversion. Even the use of the term has been abdicated in some quarters. Surely this posture discards the baby along with bath water. If the category of conversion has been misused and misunderstood, then liberal Christians are obliged to develop a view of conversion rather than flee the task out of embarrassment.[20]

In fact, such a "view of conversion" is a possibility in the Reformed Tradition. David Steinmetz has undertaken precisely this task by demonstrating that the American evangelical tradition has, by no means, embraced the entire scope of conversion. Steinmetz sums these up as follows:

> These four themes from early Protestant thought--the denial of the possibility of preparation for the reception of grace, the insistence on the church as the context in which genuine repentance takes place, the description of conversion as a

continuous and lifelong process, and the warning
that there is no conversion which does not exact a
price from the penitent--are certainly not the only
themes which need to be considered by the church in
the present as it ponders its own evangelistic
mission. Indeed, they may even need to be
corrected by insights derived from the Bible or
other voices in the Christian tradition. But they
are insights which cannot be lightly set aside.[21]

Unfortunately, neither these facets of conversion nor
those emphasized in evangelical circles receive much
attention in Presbyterian Churches. Our hesitations over the
excesses of revivalism and our generally troubled
relationship with evangelism, especially in this century, has
effectively screened our appreciation of and conversation
about conversion as well.

V. WHEN WE DON'T TALK ABOUT OUR ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

I've attempted here to demonstrate that a certain kind
of conversation--witness to one's personal encounter with
God--is subtly devalued and therefore scarce in Presbyterian
and liberal Protestant circles. For Mainline Christians in
secular, individualist America, other forms of discourse--
those undergirded by scientific validation or a part of a
logical theological system--seem more promising in providing
a useful world-view.

The eclipse of witness is important because it marks a
quiet shift in the topic of our conversation away from the

essence of Biblical faith, namely encounter with God. This is not to discount the value of theological reflection, ethical rigor, liturgy, and community. However, when these are abstracted from the ground of encounter; when they are second-hand and routine, then they become increasingly unlike what inspired them in the first place.

C. Ellis Nelson has argued in How Faith Matures that religious faith faces multiple dilemmas when the founders' experiences of God are not replicated in subsequent generations. For the Church, this means that faith will calcify and loose vitality if we don't experience in our own lives encounters which resemble, say, Moses' theophany, or the fishermen's call or the upper room filling with the Holy Spirit. The founders' original experiences of God serve to launch the tradition and provide models of how God works and how faithful people respond. But they cannot substitute for similar first hand experiences in each subsequent generation.

Faith matures, argues Nelson, through the transforming experience of God touching individuals in particular situations. Without this, rituals--once vital enactments of God's presence--grow commonplace. So also do communities--once the gathering of those originally struck by a vision--grow rational and stable. Communication--once reflection on life-changing experience--slips into codification and definition.

Nelson moves on to assert that theophany, a literary

form through which a community frames and remembers spiritual experience, is the vehicle through which someone's personal experience of God can be communicated to the community. The importance of these cannot be overestimated. Nelson explains this as follows:

> The narrative style, or story, of how a person experiences the Divine is extremely important for the spiritual health of a community of believers. What is required is for the community to re-present the religious experience to itself so that it may be able to receive further revelations from God and be open to change. In short, the community needs to discover how a personal experience with God can be translated into directives for the community. Theophanies are such accounts. They certify the guidance of God within the events of history, thus prolonging the presence of God and providing expectations of further visitations. Theophanies are the classical biblical way of affirming the necessity of religious experience to the corroding influences of institutionalization from secularizing the community of believers.[22]

For Presbyterians who have, for the reasons outlined above, lost their vocabulary of experience, Nelsons' insight provides a rich clue to our spiritual condition. If indeed finding ways to talk with one another about our relationships with God is a vital source of congregational renewal and guidance, then Presbyterians, together with similar traditions within the Protestant family, are in a precarious place.

Earlier in this chapter, I quoted Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks who said, in effect, that Presbyterians, while still

having experiences of faith, are inhibited from expressing them. As a result, they went on to say, Presbyterian evangelistic witness outside the church suffers through lack of practice.[23] Nelson's insights suggest that the situation is more dire than the loss of evangelistic mission. If, as he says, sharing of religious experience is necessary to stem the drift into self-serving institutionalism and dry formalism, then the hush of such talk among Presbyterians is certainly a factor in our current institutional dilemma.

IV. THE PROJECT

All that we've said so far suggests that if Presbyterians--I'm thinking of ordinary laypeople engaged in Christian community--could be coaxed into sharing with one another the personal stories of their own encounters with God, this exercise alone would be energizing and transforming. Such an effort would re-introduce the language of encounter into the fellowship. It is likely that several barriers to this kind of intimacy would emerge. Presbyterian congregants may be reluctant to commit themselves to participate because they would have little appreciation for such sharing. Understandably, they would probably feel shy or lack words which would convey their deepest convictions and inspirations. They may feel that such sharing is essentially un-Presbyterian. Strategies for overcoming these

difficulties would have to be employed in order to make such conversation possible.

The project through which I propose to re-introduce the language of encounter into Presbyterian congregations will be detailed in the following chapters. It takes the shape of an adult class, employing Bible study and conversation. The spiritual experience under discussion is conversion. The course endeavors to bring participants' existing attitudes toward and knowledge about conversion into dialogue with scriptural passages which narrate experiences commonly considered conversions. Thus, participants will develop their capacity to think and talk about conversion. Studying the Scriptures for insights about conversion will provide the foundation for students to speak personally about their own experiences of conversion. The project's aim is to counter the loss of sharing about spiritual experience, specifically conversion, in Presbyterian churches.

Before we turn to the project, it is important to note that the topic of conversion in itself presents its own problems. One of these problems we've discussed here, namely, conversion's association with the excesses of the revivalistic movements. There are other difficulties. Study of conversion is hampered by the fact that the term appears infrequently in the Bible. What's more, religious conversions tend to be situation and individual specific. In other

words, conversions are as diverse as the individuals who undergo them. So, even to state directly what the word *conversion* means opens up a variety of problems. Somehow these problems, specific to the topic, need to be held and pondered by the class.

The project I propose, then, is made complex by several factors. In response to the complexity of its subject, the class will feature different kinds of learning and teaching. The class not only aims to help students acquire information but also to process that information and to share personal stories with the others.

Despite these complexities, indeed because of them as we'll see, the strategy outlined here is one whereby a congregation can use what God has already given to members for the transformation of the entire group.

To conversion and the project we now turn.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MEANING OF CONVERSION

I. INTRODUCTION

Several years before I developed the adult study on conversion--"Conversion in Retrospect"--I proposed another very different project on conversion to my Doctor of Ministry Seminar Group at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Composed of clergy from different traditions, the group had set aside time together to offer me feedback about that project.

We never got to feedback. Instead, we spent the hour in spirited discussion of what *conversion* meant. It was a significant scene--a room filled with theologically trained people who were stalled on a term's meaning. The rabbi in the group used the word to refer to the move from one faith tradition to a different one. For her, conversion was changing congregations. A Methodist minister--a self-des-cribed convert--thought the term irrelevant to contemporary life. Some felt that *conversion's* meaning was obvious. These ministers puzzled over the others' confusion. Still others took an old polemical stance, asking the tired

question whether conversion is slow or instantaneous.

As the aimless conversation consumed more and more of "my" hour, a tiny intuition drifted through my thoughts. This debate *itself* was teaching me something basic about religious conversion. It's problematic. People find it difficult to reach agreement about conversion's essential character.

This hunch has since grown into a settled conviction which informs much of how I've shaped the adult study, later described. For several reasons, religious conversion is a particularly nettlesome concept. The seminar group's in-ability to move beyond the definition problem encapsulates the wider Church's struggle with the idea. This struggle is a theme which threads through the Church's history, par-ticularly at present.

The principal reason for confusion on *conversion's* meaning is because *conversion* can connote a multitude of interrelated ideas. It may mean no more than changing churches, as when a Methodist family--dissatisfied with its minister--begins worshipping with a Lutheran congregation. Someone else might use *conversion* to describe an absorbing emotional experience which persuades her to undertake relief work among the poor. In Hugh Kerr and John Mulder's book, Conversions,[24] the reader can discern a variety of experien-ces which people call "conversion." The word has referred

to:

- -changing faith communities

- -experiencing an encounter with the divine

- -perceiving a familiar truth in a forceful new way

- -undertaking a new calling

- -rejecting one's past and embracing a new existence

- -changing one's religion

Conversion can entail one or many of these elements.

The difficulty in defining *conversion* compounds the problems which we outlined in Chapter One. Presbyterians, together with other Protestants, find it difficult to talk about conversion because we devalue and privatize religious experience in our churches. Even if we could overcome this barrier, we would quickly learn that conversion is maddeningly difficult to pin down. To make a single generalization about it, to clarify what it is, when it occurs, or how to foster it is to invite contradiction and qualification.

None of this is to suggest that conversion isn't a robust concept in American culture. Conversion as an experience is intrinsically vital despite definition problems. With the rise of new religious movements in America, plus the resurgence of evangelical Christianity, there has been a popularization of conversion talk. To be "born again" nowadays is respectable even if the meaning of that experience is fluid. Discussion of conversions has broken

out of the confines of marginal sect groups. Today, not only is religious television teeming with talk about personal conversion, so is mainstream programing. Born again celebrities who speak of their faith are commonplace in popular American culture. With all of its ambiguity and new-found popularity, conversion has, not surprisingly, become the subject of scholarly attention. A spate of books and articles on the subject have appeared. Surprisingly, some of the more vigorous studies of conversion are in the social sciences. Nowadays, students of culture are increasingly interested in commitment, recruitment, and personal transformation.[25]

None of this, however, diminishes conversion's complexity. Presbyterians, who may hear more about conversion outside of church than within, are left to themselves to make sense of what they hear. They may feel intrigued or confused. They may be irritated or alienated, feeling left out. Presbyterians may infer from their church's relative silence on conversion that it is an experience particular to other traditions. They may conclude that it is unimportant or undesirable in their own tradition. This is particularly true when one quarter in the church, especially pietistic groups who favor a style or pattern of conversion, appear to be doing all talking about this experience. Hearing about conversion in such a way that focuses on a facet which feels

alien, easily leads Presbyterians, in turn, to dismiss the whole experience.

To illustrate: in 1973 Gabriel Fackre delivered the Hyde Lecture at the Autumn convocation of Andover Newton Theological School. Titled "Conversion," Fackre was clearly addressing a developing situation on campus and in congregations. Church members and seminary students were experiencing conversions and talking about them. The problem was that a limited conception of the experience was dominating the conversation. In his own way, Fackre was concerned with conversion's complexity. His strategy in the lecture was to define conversion as a four-fold movement always entailing repentance, faith, baptism (entry into community), and service. This snippet of his remarks is characteristic:

> There is, in fact, a peculiar pattern to our distortions. Those who have caught something of the light tend to fix upon one or another of the phases of conversion, absolutizing it, dispensing with the rest.[26]

My pastoral concern is with those people in our churches who miss the benefit of this kind of guidance. Laypeople especially don't have opportunity to study nor discuss conversion with fellow Presbyterians. As a result, we often carry a limited idea of what conversion is.

My more general concern is with the way theologians, exegetes, and others neglect conversion's complexity. This

leads to a variety of problems, especially in biblical interpretation. With alarming frequency, students of the Scriptures will carry--unacknowledged--simplistic definitions of *conversion* to their study of the text. This pre-existing concept, in turn, will influence what the exegete derives from the text about conversion.

The now classic example of this is Krister Stendahl's provocative assertion in two essays[27] published in the early 1960's that the Apostle Paul--traditionally regarded as the prototypical convert--really experienced no conversion at all. He supports this contention with several striking exegetical observations. First, Stendahl finds no evidence in either Paul or Luke that Paul underwent a sweeping personal transformation as a way to resolve a deep feeling of moral inadequacy before God. A careful reading of evidence from Acts and Paul's own hand, in other words, undercuts the long-held assumption that guilt and a change in religions was the essence of Paul's entrance into Christianity. Later, in "Paul Among Jews and Gentiles," Stendahl demonstrates that Paul's experience was more comparable to the calls of Isaiah and Jeremiah than to the personal transformation associated with conversion. From these admittedly impressive insights Stendahl challenges the usefulness of the concept, "con-version," when speaking of Paul. Suddenly the "prototypical" conversion is challenged and a significant scholarly debate

ensues.

Of interest to this discussion isn't Stendahl's exegesis but his working definition of *conversion*. It is with this that he evaluates. In neither essay does he draw his definition forthrightly. But it becomes evident as the essays unfold. Early in "Paul Among Jews and Gentiles," Stendahl writes:

> ...A closer reading of these accounts, both those in Acts and those by Paul himself, reveals a greater continuity between "before" and "after." Here is not a change of "religion" that we commonly associate with the word conversion.[28]

Later he writes:

> The usual conversion model of Paul the Jew who gives up his former faith to become a Christian is not the model of Paul, but of ours.[29]

Thus, early in the discussion of conversion in "Paul Among Jews and Gentiles," Stendahl identifies what he assumes conversion to be, namely, change of religion.

Stendahl introduces another nuance in his working definition when he writes:

> ...By using the idea of conversion we are apt to separate Paul, a person with a highly specific experience of that encounter with Christ which convinces and which creates faith.[30]

Stendahl sees conversion entailing a new attitude or belief based on an experience. He distinguishes attitude

change from vocation. If we read the New Testament texts on Paul's experience, we will discover, so Stendahl asserts, that they show massive attention to vocational change, but scant attention to a switch in convictions which rendered Paul a Christian. To overstate, Stendahl suggests that Paul is the same man before and after the Damascus Road. He possesses, however, a new mission.[31]

Stendahl's reader can see this working definition of *conversion* operating in the earlier essay, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West." The definition is less explicit here but consistent with what we find in "Paul Among Jews and Gentiles."

> There is not--as we usually think--first a conver-
> sion, and then a call to apostleship; there is only
> the call to work among the Gentiles.[32]

Evidently, commissioning is not an element in Stendahl's notion of *conversion*, a notion he assumes that his readers generally share.

By piecing together evidence sprinkled through both essays, the reader can infer that *conversion* means for Stendahl a change of religion as resolution for a troubled conscience. Based on this, Stendahl argues that Paul is better understood as receiving a commission.

Readers of Stendahl's essays may be tempted to conclude that a sophisticated reading of the New Testament reveals Paul to be something other than a convert. Indeed, Stendahl

succeeds in demonstrating the priority of commissioning in Paul's transformation. However, the conclusion that "conversion" is the wrong word is not the result of Stendahl's exegesis. It is the inevitable result of his working definition. By construing *conversion* to embrace only struggle with guilt and change of religion to resolve the struggle, Stendahl reaches a conclusion which sounds bolder than it is.

This lengthy illustration suggests that if conversion's complexity goes unacknowledged in writings of this sophistication then similar errors are possible anywhere. If the *conversion* concept can be drawn in such a way which raises questions about Paul's conversion, then it can be construed to exclude (or include) anyone's experience.

II. THE PLAN OF THIS CHAPTER

We've been discussing problems which arise when our idea of religious conversion is conceived of too narrowly. The balance of this chapter will offer three reasons why conversion as an experience and an idea is particularly fluid and multifaceted. Acknowledging this complexity does not render *conversion* so diffuse that it means anything. Indeed, despite its multiplicity, *conversion* is a coherent and useful concept. This I will also show. In the light of this, I will then suggest a strategy for seeking insight on conversion in both the Scriptures and Church History in a way which

honors this complexity. I contend that without such a strategy, we can study conversion in tradition in a way that doesn't enrich our understanding, but only mirrors what we already believe. I will conclude the chapter by showing how all of this informs the approach I took in the adult study-- "Conversion in Retrospect."

IV. THE FLUIDITY AND MULTIPLICITY OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

Ludwig Wittgenstein

The British analytical philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his <u>Philosophical Investigations</u>[33], makes several helpful observations about the definition of words. He shows how a concept like *conversion* can refer to many different things and still make sense when used in discourse. A word's definition, says Wittgenstein, does not precisely prescribe the word's use. Neither does it dictate exactly that to which the word refers. There is not a static correspondence between a word and its referent. Rather, words are embedded in contexts, verbal and situational. These, which Wittgenstein calls "language games," function with the word to lend meaning. A simple example of a language game would be the discourse that takes place in a hospital operating room. The surgeon says, "Scalpel!" The meaning of this is: "Nurse, hand me the scalpel." The point is that the word alone does not bear the entire meaning. The context is

critical.

Words alone point to a complicated network of interre-
lated ideas which Wittgenstein calls, "family
resemblances."[34] A word's definition, which we find in a
dictionary, is merely a listing of some elements in the
family of resemblances. Wittgenstein likens a word or
concept to a piece of hemp rope.[35] The rope is composed of
fibers woven together. No single fiber spans the entire
length of the rope. Rather, many fibers working together
compose the whole. The rope's strength does not rely on a
single strand which runs the rope's entire length. Strength
is a function of many strands in a systematic relationship.

Words or concepts work much the same way. With words,
no single designation exhausts how people might use the word.
Meaning obtains only in the context of language games.

Conversion provides a particularly rich example of
Wittgenstein's theory. People use and understand the word in
various contexts or "language games." For example, members
of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Crusade staff use the word
meaningfully in meetings, written material, or private
conversations. The Crusade staff would engage in a language
game in which *conversion* plays a role. On the other hand, a
gathering of representatives from various religions and the
social sciences would struggle mightily to find a definition
of *conversion* that circumscribes the variety of ways which

the participants use the word. In the latter gathering many "language games" would be at work. To seek a definition of *conversion* in such a setting would reveal just how imprecise and complicated the concept is. Wittgenstein's insights into definition anticipate the futility of trying to determine an objective definition of *conversion*--one upon which all users of the word could agree.

Wittgenstein goes on, however, to say that when we need a definition for some particular purpose, we may simply draw one. We can't give a comprehensive definition but we can draw one.[36] We can simply designate a boundary to determine what counts as a conversion and what doesn't. This exercise is a language game in itself and serves a specific purpose.

This last point is important for this chapter and we will return to it later. Put briefly, talk about conversion is well-served by setting up in advance what *conversion* shall mean. This may seem mechanical or stilted. But as we've seen, significant debate can be had on, say, Paul's conversion, in the absence of a "drawn" or working definition against which to compare, say, biblical material.

Beyond this, Wittgenstein helps us by overthrowing the assumption which drove the Socratic dialogues and which quietly lingers in many discussions of conversion. This idea holds that if we work at it then we can find the essential form of any concept. Socrates and his partners in dialogue

were forever seeking to state exactly or always what concepts like "justice," "piety," or "love" meant. They often failed to find the essential--even transcendent--meaning. They never, however, seemed to doubt that it was out there.

Wittgenstein helps us abandon such a search. His insights into definition liberate us to talk about conversion, study it in various church traditions, and share personal experiences without being hampered with the need to say what it is in essence. Establishing authoritative definition either as a prerequisite for conversation or as a goal of study is always an abuse of a concept's meaning.

Wittgenstein informs this study by showing how a concept is richly meaningful without benefit of definition. Conversion is not always or essentially, say, accepting Christ or repenting sins. Surely this is refreshing news to someone whose spiritual experiences, which don't conform to some model of conversion, have transformed his or her life.

The objective of both this report and the adult class is to explore *conversion's* meaning without finally trying to pinpoint a definition. This is not to say that *conversion* will mean for us everything and nothing. As we've seen, this and every concept is a system of inter-related ideas which hold rich meaning when operating in a context or language game. Tentative or working definitions we will use. In the class, all students' observations and experiences are

regarded as helpful and valid. By proceeding in a Wittgen-
steinian spirit, we will position ourselves to acknowledge
conversion's dynamism and complexity both in the Scriptures,
church history, and in our own experience.

The Old and New Testaments

Introduction.   The natural Protestant response to
theological problems such as those which surround conversion
is to appeal to the Bible.   As the Westminster Confession
says, "...All things necessary for...salvation, faith, and
life is either expressly set down in Scripture or by good and
consequence may be deduced in Scripture..."[37]   Surely,
conversion is one of these "things."   Curiously, however,
neither the Old nor New Testament yields definitive answers
to the questions about conversion that have arisen through
the Church's experience.

The New Testament. For example, the word, *conversion*,
together with related words like *convert*, or *converts* appear
with surprising infrequency in English translations of the
New Testament. The KJV, on ten occasions, renders strepho or
epistrepho as "I convert." The RSV, successor to the KJV,
opts for the simpler "I turn" in all of these, save Acts
15.3.   A newer translation, the NIV, uses *convert* or
conversion eight times.   None of these, however, are for
epistrepho[38], but for neophutos, prosalutos, and aparcha.

None of the above is to suggest that *conversion* is a non-biblical concept. Such a conclusion would be simplistic. Beverly Gaventa observes that <u>metanoia</u> and <u>epistrepho</u> were "stereotypical conversion language" in the New Testament world.[39] The point of my observations is that the New Testament writers use neither these words, nor any others, consistently or systematically to describe the religious transformation which begins or vitalizes the Christian life. Neither do translators agree which Greek words correspond with the English word *conversion*. So if, in any part of the New Testament, conversion is being discussed, the text usually does not announce this fact by employing obvious key words.

This is strikingly true of the instances in the New Testament traditionally held to be personal conversion accounts.   It would seem too fundamental even to require proof that the Ethiopian Eunuch, Cornelius, and Paul of Tarsus are converts.   Preachers have traditionally called Paul's "conversion" the prototype of all Christian conversions.[40] Nevertheless, the New Testament text doesn't use the standard terminology in connection with these. If these are conversions then they have been deemed so by subsequent church tradition rather than by the New Testament itself.

The Old Testament. Much the same is true of the Old Testament. There is no unifying term in English or Hebrew around which we can establish something like an Old Testament theology of conversion. As with the New Testament, the actual word, *conversion*, (or cognates *convert*, *converting*, etc.) appears four times in the KJV.[41] Three of these are renderings of the Hebrew word, shub (to turn) and one is of haphak (to be turned). The RSV and NIV don't use a member of the *conversion* word group in these passages or any other in the Old Testament.

Once again, I do not wish to suggest that *conversion* is not an Old Testament concept. We must, however, decide in advance what *conversion* means before evaluating the Old Testament for information about it.

One fine example of how this reality can be overlooked in Old Testament study is Richard Sklba's article titled, "The Call to New Beginnings: A Biblical Theology of Conversion."[42] Under this promising title, Sklba, having implicitly reduced conversion to repentance and covenant renewal, traces the development of covenant-making or renewing in the Old Testament. In one sense, this is a valuable enrichment of our understanding of the abiding Old Testament theme and promise of turning and repenting. In another sense, Sklba's unacknowledged and truncated definition of *conversion* neglects other Old Testament

passages which inform us about conversion. What about conversion as call? Sklba makes no mention of Abraham's summons, nor that of Moses, nor the calls of the prophets. Neither does he consider as a conversion the switching of religions. One thinks of Ruth as an example of this kind of conversion. Sklba really hasn't given us a biblical theology of conversion, only a theology of new beginnings.

To summarize, the *conversion* word group makes few appearances in the Old and New Testaments. Words which name experiences constitutive of what subsequent Church tradition has called "conversion," on the other hand, are plentiful. Also plentiful in the Scriptures are stories of life-changing calls to new service, repentance and renewed fellowship with God, visionary experiences which transform people's thinking, and the like.

Conclusion. The scarcity of conversion language in the Old and New Testaments makes complex the defining of *conversion* by appeal to biblical authority. The Bible features no unifying term which ties together the various facets that have come to constitute our idea of conversion. To recall Witt-genstein's rope, we might say that all the fibers are present in the Scriptures. They just aren't woven together.

Thus, how the Church draws its definition of *conversion* tends to determine what in the Bible counts as conversion.

If our operating definition of *conversion* is fluid and imprecise, then any biblical story about religious change or entrance into a covenant fellowship appears to be a conversion. If, on the other hand, we emphasize that conversion is--to pick an aspect--radical discontinuity with a sinful past, then suddenly the Ethiopian Eunuch and Cornelius--both pious and searching men--don't fit the pattern. How we define the concept determines how we read the Bible for information on conversion. How precisely and clearly we frame it, how self-conscious we are of our operating definition, tends to dictate what we find in the Scriptures.

Alan Segal, in Paul the Convert,[43] calls *conversion* "etic" vocabulary in the New Testament.[44] By this he means it belongs to the discourse of those who analyze and describe systems or cultures from the outside. "Emic" terminology, in contrast, is language embedded in its own system or culture. New Testament authors speak of "repentance," being "born anew," "turning to God," and so on to describe the change people undergo when they meet Christ. This is emic language. Talk of conversion is emic in the Church as it speaks of its own experiences of transformation. *Conversion* is etic when moderns use it to analyze New Testament (and by extension, Old Testament) events such as Paul's Damascus Road experience or the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch.

Segal makes the emic-etic distinction to help the reader

achieve self-consciousness in the use of terminology. *Conversion* is a powerful word among Christians. We should not, however, uncritically impose it on the New Testament text in a way that obscures the subtleties and nuances of what the ancient authors actually said. We need to be aware which words are New Testament words and which words are our words about New Testament words.

Church History

Introduction. So far, I have argued with Wittgenstein that concepts are meaningful, not because a precise definition prescribes usage, but because a systematic maze of facets and nuances set in a context conveys sense. Bluntly, all words are complex. *Conversion* is one of those complex concepts that is particularly illuminated by Wittgenstein's insights. In this section we are working with *conversion's* fluidity and multiplicity. Later, we will name several of the facets commonly belonging to the "maze" of meanings constitutive of *conversion*.

Second, we have observed the absence of a comprehensive biblical term which equates to our idea of *conversion*. This makes the task of consulting the Bible for insight on conversion complex.

In this section, I will demonstrate the fluidity of the conversion idea in Church tradition. Even when the term,

conversion is emic in a particular historical situation, it means different, but related, things in different conversations. *Conversion* is emic in today's situation. However, as we've seen, it means different things in different conversations. Further, as the historical situation changes, so does *conversion's* meaning. Put differently, the nature of the conversion phenomenon is situational. Kerr and Mulder have reminded us that during the Middle Ages few conversions were reported.[45] Today, in contrast, the experience is operative.[46] Each period has construed conversion in a way which is particular to the circumstances of that time.

<u>Conversion and Puritanism</u>. One period in American Church History which particularly illuminates how conversion operates differently in different circumstances is the stretch from early seventeenth century English Puritanism until eighteenth century revivalism in America. Jerald Brauer has suggested that the concept of conversion, a crucial religious experience in all of those settings, actually had four distinct essences, each of which suited its time.

Conversion functioned in one way in Puritan England, another way in Puritan New England, yet another way in the late 17th century America, and yet a fourth way in the revivalism of the Great Awakening. We will take these in turn.

1.   The Puritan movement in England endeavored to "capture the future of the Church of England in order to transform it."[47]   For a person to experience conversion in this context was much like enlisting in a righteous protest movement.   English Puritan leaders carefully established a sequence of experiences involved in authentic conversions so newcomers could be clearly identified as having crossed over to the Puritan perspective.

2.   In New England, on the other hand, there was no civil and ecclesiastical establishment to protest. Puritanism was the establishment.   In this setting, conversion served to guard the Church's purity and to signify the believer's commitment to its utopian vision.   In first generation Puritan America, Church leaders required communicants to give evidence of the religious experience that accompanied conversion as a sign that they were on a genuine spiritual journey.

3.   By 1662--during the "devotional crisis of the second generation"[48]--there was a growing population of Puritan children and grandchildren who could not report a conversion experience.   The famous Halfway Covenant, which granted a form of church membership to those unable to report a conversion experience, weakened the Puritan emphasis on conversion.   Solomon Stoddard, an important architect of the halfway covenant, was willing to compromise church purity in

favor of the nurture afforded to halfway members by church membership. This development severely undercut the necessity of conversion. No longer a prerequisite for membership in the church, conversion became a private devotional event of importance only to the individual.

4. The final development discussed by Brauer came with the revivalism beginning in the 1730's. During this time, thanks in part to the leadership of Jonathan Edwards, conversion was restored to a central place in American piety. In one sense, conversion assumed a role similar to that which it took in English Puritanism. It marked a protest against religious laxity. Says Brauer:

> All aspects of religious life came under criticism--the deadness of worship, the lack of discipline in the life of the laity, ostentation in dress, the questionable piety of the clergy, and the inadequacy of the religious establishment as provided by the state.[49]

By the 18th century in America conversion became a mass recruiting technique in a rapidly growing new society. This second development, like the first, restored conversion to a central and crucial place in American piety.

The "Old Fashioned" Church. A mile away from the church building where I am pastor stands a tiny Church of God whose exterior brick edifice displays foot high letters which read, "Welcome to the end of your search for an old-fashioned

church." I phoned the pastor for details about his congregation. Among the old-fashioned elements of this congregation is an entrance requirement of a reportable second birth experience accompanied by water baptism by "submersion." I queried the pastor carefully as to what constitutes a born again experience. He repeatedly asserted that it consisted of repentance of sins and water baptism.

In view of the variety of ways that conversion has been construed through history, I wonder which "old fashioned" element this church prided itself in preserving. I suspect, given the Appalachian background of the membership, and the hard, chaotic lives that many congregants had known, that focus on sins and holiness of life is precisely the form of God's grace that would be revolutionary in that setting.

The importance of setting for understanding conversion is the point of this section. Conversion as a concept is made complex because it is so influenced by context. As circumstances change so does conversion's nature. There is no ideal historical era after which we should pattern our evangelism efforts or compare our conversion experiences. There is no model of conversion that guides us in every time.

V.   THE UNITY AND MEANINGFULNESS OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

We have argued so far against approaches--scholarly or in church practice--which stereotype or make rigid the

meaning of religious conversion. We have seen that to pin conversion down violates its dynamism and multiplicity. In examining conversion in the Scriptures and church history, we have affirmed Wittgenstein's insight that concepts do not possess a precise meaning which rigidly correlates with the word.

We need now to balance this with recognition that concepts do signify an inter-related complex of ideas which, in context, come to have meaning. In Wittgenstein's rope there are many strands, none of which span the rope's entire length nor provide the rope's strength. Fibers in systematic relationship--namely, being twisted and woven together-- constitute a piece of rope.

Religious conversion similarly entails a multiplicity of strands. We have named some of these already. Without some interrelationship of ideas, however, *conversion* would convey no meaning at all. This is how a word as complex as *conversion* is indeed useful in religious discourse and at the same time can refer to such a variety of ideas over a long period of time.

To list the strands or common elements entailed in conversion will always be an unfinished exercise because, as Wittgenstein has taught, we can never definitively say how a word functions in discourse.

With this acknowledgment, we are free to identify some

of conversion's main elements. I've assembled the following short list on the basis of my own study of conversion as it is used by contemporary Christians, various theologians, and my understanding of how transformation is presented in the Bible. Conversion entails:

-contrition over sin and resolve to change

-a sudden perception of the truth and profundity of one's religion

-entrance into a new religious community

-a change in life's course which may occur several times

-a calling to new service for God

-a break or rejection of one's past life

-the experience of a uniquely absorbing encounter with the divine

Often, when believers speak of conversion, variations of the above are constitutive of that experience.

VI. A METHODOLOGY FOR STUDYING CONVERSION

In view of all that we've said so far about the complexity and multiplicity of religious conversion, it follows that there are better and worse ways to study and discuss it, especially in Christian context. Whenever an author or teacher assumes that conversion is essentially anything--be that a decision, repentance, or whatever--then the conversation will be unnecessarily limited.

I think of the evangelistic efforts of Campus Crusade, which, if their literature is to be taken as representative, have boiled conversion down to the volitional act of "receiving Christ by faith." Bill Bright writes:

> We must individually receive Jesus Christ as savior and lord; then we can know God personally and experience his love...We receive Christ by personal invitation...Receiving Christ involves turning to God from self (repentance) and trusting Christ to come into our lives to forgive our sins and to make us the kind of people he wants us to be. Just to agree intellectually that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he died on the cross for our sins is not enough. Nor is it enough to have an emotional experience. We must receive Jesus Christ by faith, as an act of the will.[50]

One can easily imagine how, armed with this notion of the conversion experience, well-intentioned converts could determine that someone who hadn't consciously "received Christ" had never experienced conversion and, by inference, had never entered the Christian life.

Example: Beverly Gaventa's *From Darkness to Light*

A more adequate approach is that taken by Beverly Gaventa in her book, From Darkness to Light. Her study of conversion in the New Testament acknowledges conversion's multiplicity and dynamism. Her method is to establish what *conversion* shall mean for her study before she analyzes texts commonly held to be conversion accounts. In the introduction

of her book, she writes:

> Certainly the first task is to establish a working
> definition of conversion and to distinguish between
> conversion and other types of change. In part, I
> isolate that because of the current situation, in
> which the term is applied to a great variety of
> experience. There is, however, another reason,
> which is that some biblical scholars have called
> into question the custom of speaking of the conver-
> sion of Paul, and have argued that the term is
> inappropriate or misleading. While they may be
> quite right to protest the popular view of Paul's
> experience, the first issue raised is, again, what
> we mean by the term conversion.[51]

By way of definition, Gaventa suggests three forms which
conversions can take. These are not necessarily compatible
with each other. A conversion may, in other words, conform
to one form but not the other two.

The first, patterned after William James' classic
definition,[52] Gaventa calls "pendulum-like" change. This
form of conversion is a radical reorientation of life which
makes a fundamental break with one's past.

The second mode of change Gaventa calls "alternations."
Drawing on Richard Travisano's work,[53] Gaventa describes an
alternation as a life change which grows out of one's past.
Instead of breaking with past, an alternation is a
culmination of the past. When an avid church member comes to
feel a call to enroll in seminary, this new vocation is
likely to be the outgrowth of her earlier activity. This is
an alternation.

Finally, Gaventa includes "transformations" which are cognitive reorientations. Thomas Kuhn's concept of paradigm shifts[54] informs Gaventa's concept of "transformation." Aptly called, "ah ha!" experiences, a transformation might be the experience of a life-long worship attender who, at age sixty, suddenly perceives the Gospel as immensely important.

The value of Gaventa's three-fold typology is its ability to honor conversion's multiplicity without allowing the concept to designate everything and nothing.

Equipped with this three-fold understanding of conversion, Gaventa turns to various biblical personalities to determine if their experience may legitimately be likened to one or more of her three elements. She finds Paul's experience, contra Stendahl, indeed to be a conversion in the sense that it is a transformation. The Ethiopian Eunuch, on the other hand, because of his pious searching background, seems to have been converted in the sense of an alternation.[55]

Gaventa's methodology in studying conversion in the Scriptures is largely compatible with all the insights we have offered here. It is worth emphasizing that Gaventa, an exegete, makes no attempt to find her model of conversion in the New Testament. Her looking elsewhere implicitly acknowledges that the concept is, to use Segal's word, "etic" language. Further, Gaventa acknowledges conversion's multi-

plicity by offering, instead of a definition, a three-fold typology. She doesn't exactly define in the sense of drawing a boundary around what the word shall mean. Rather, she provides a complex idea of conversion by suggesting that it can mean different, even contrary, things. Only then, with this in place, does Gaventa begin to explore New Testament texts. When her exegesis finds that a biblical character's experience is comparable with one of the three forms of conversion, she concludes that the word *conversion* is useful in describing that person's experience.

I've traced Gaventa's strategy for studying conversion in the New Testament because it avoids the twin difficulties of conversion's multiplicity and the Scripture's scanty use of the term. Further, Gaventa keeps contemporary ideas of conversion from becoming entangled and indistinguishable from Scriptural affirmations of personal change.

A helpful analogy comes from the psychological concept of projection. Projection is finding in others traits that are undesirable and unacknowledged in oneself. Paradoxically, awareness of one's own undesirable tendencies helps us achieve greater objectivity in assessing others.

We can transfer this principle to the point we're making here. By first drawing a contemporary definition of *conversion* before examining the Bible, we keep a distinction between what belongs to our culture and what belongs to the

Scripture.

This approach is helpful not only in scholarly efforts but in pastoral ones as well. A fundamental reason why conversion can become an alienating, intimidating idea in congregations--certainly in Presbyterian congregations--is because its meaning is often drawn too narrowly. This, in turn, excludes many people's experiences. When one aspect of conversion's meaning, explicitly or implicitly, is purported to be biblical (and normative) then the whole subject of conversion becomes irritating at best and abusive at worse. This compounds the problem we discussed in the first chapter. Adult Presbyterians are likely to be uncomfortable discussing spiritual experiences under any circumstances. One spiritual experience in particular, conversion, is doubly troublesome.

"Conversion in Retrospect's" Approach to Discussing Conversion"

This was definitely the situation which I found when I assembled my adult class on conversion. Conversion is not a standard operative concept in our church. My parishioners were not accustomed to discussing the idea. As a result, I encountered a rich variety of experiences and impressions about conversion. Some members felt alienated at the outset of the class, feeling that conversion was "overblown." Some carried a notion of conversion as an alien spiritual ex-

perience which they had neither had nor desired. Others were honestly ignorant of the idea having had little opportunity to explore it. Still others had personally undergone experiences called "conversions" and hoped that the class would stimulate renewal in the congregation. Several class members had undergone very personal and private spiritual experiences and never found the courage to speak of them in the class. Some remembered experiences that might be called "conversions," but had dismissed these turning points as idiosyncratic and insignificant.

Because of this variety of backgrounds and attitudes, it was essential that our class format respect conversion's complexity. I, as the class's teacher, made it a point never to define or delineate conversion to the degree that it would exclude anyone's experience. What's more, such a definition would have quietly excluded Scripture texts which may illuminate how God works in and transforms people's lives.

In the class which I conducted, I at no time, declared a final definition for conversion. I declined to use my influence as the teacher to proclaim what conversion was. Instead, I asked at the outset for students to name facets of conversion as they understood it. These I captured on news print in view of all participants. We worked from this list of facets or descriptions of conversion. As we explored various Biblical texts we returned to our list to modify and

extend it.

This method had several advantages. It preserved conversion's complexity and multiplicity by never becoming concrete enough to eliminate facets or strands. It also preserved a clear distinction between our words and biblical words. At no point were we asking the Scriptures to yield a definition of an experience which it rarely names. Instead, we carried our description of conversion into our study of the text, asking how our concept could be deepened.

For example, the class participants readily named, repentance, in the sense of contrition, as a facet of their idea of conversion. Later, when we studied Jesus' call of the fishers (Mark 1.14-20), we noted that Jesus named repentance as part of the fitting response to the presence of God's Kingdom. Our study further informed us that discipleship--following Jesus--was Mark's paradigm for appropriate response to the Gospel. Further, the fishers, Jesus' earliest followers, were model disciples--at least at first. Curiously, Mark never narrates that these followers repented of their sins. They do, however, abandon their jobs and communities. Our exegesis informed that this turning away from life as they knew it could be legitimately equated with repentance. This observation, coupled with the fact that all Markan followers of Jesus abandon their jobs, deepens the idea of repentance. Mark calls his readers to a

much more involved break with the previous life than simply contrition over sin.

This kind of discovery illustrates how the Scriptures can have authority to shape and enrich our idea of conversion in the context of the methodology that we have developed.

For the entire twelve hours of class time, we explored conversion without finally defining it. In this exploration, we began to appreciate the richness and importance of the experiences it points to. In the absence of a rigid stereo-type of conversion, some of us found in the biblical per-sonalities experiences which compared with incidents in our own lives. As we explored, we became more comfortable talking together about conversions and related experiences. As conversion became richer for us, several class members began recalling experiences which could be included among conversion's facets.

Wittgenstein uses another image to illustrate his ideas. He describes how our "language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses."[56]

As I reflect on what our class did in its investigation of conversion, I imagine us exploring this city. Our concept indeed was very ancient and also new. Its streets and houses

were like mazes. Perhaps they were intimidating or confusing at first. Yet, as we explored and acquainted ourselves with this ancient town, some of us began to remember being in this city before. Some of us found familiar landmarks that, to our surprise, were places we had once inhabited. And even those who were confirmed tourists, certain that they were visiting for the first time, came to appreciate at least some of this old town's hospitality and charm.

CHAPTER THREE

LOCATING CONVERSION IN REFORMED THEOLOGY

In my early twenties, I sometimes spent spring break
with the legendary hordes of college students at Ft. Lauder-
dale, Florida. Not only was this beach town a haven for fun-
loving kids, it was also the focus of annual evangelistic
projects sponsored by Inter Varsity Fellowship, Campus
Crusade for Christ, and other groups. I remember walking
alone on the beach late one afternoon and being approached by
an energetic beach evangelist. I decided to let him direct
the conversation rather than volunteering information about
my own Christian discipleship and impending church vocation.
The evangelist asked me about my college and major. When I
told him that I was studying philosophy he became visibly
concerned about my soul's peril.

 His questions continued. Had I, he asked, ever read the
New Testament--the Gospel According to John in particular?
He was surprised to hear that I had. But had I, he pressed
on, ever taken seriously Jesus' words on the necessity of a
second birth experience? My affirmative answer brought the
conversation to a new level of intensity. But had I actually
acted on that necessity, he implored. Again, my "yes" to

this question seemed to "up the ante." Could a philosophy student possibly be a born again Christian? Or, was he playing with words?

More questions would be necessary.

"Then," said the evangelist, "you have invited Jesus Christ to come into your heart and to take away your sins by his atoning sacrifice?"

"Yes," I said.

"You claim Jesus Christ to be your personal Lord and Savior?"

"Yes."

"So," his voice slowed for emphasis, "if you were to die this very moment, would you know where you would spend eternity, either in Heaven or Hell?"

"Yes."

With this final answer the beach evangelist stopped in the sand and stuck his hand out to shake mine. "Doug, it's great to know you--a fellow Christian!"

With my spiritual status certified, the conversation took on a decidedly less urgent tone. We talked casually about his work in Campus Crusade and my future plans. After fifteen minutes we parted.

I. CONVERSION IN POPULAR PIETY

I recall this incident because it hints at how

conversion fits into popular American Evangelical theology, a position which I'll use to contrast with my own Reformed theology. The young evangelist had apparently held that my status as a Christian was contingent on the experience of being born again or having a conversion experience. Of course, he never stated precisely what his theological assumptions were. But his demeanor, which changed when he was satisfied about my experience, certainly suggested how he was thinking. My speculation is that something like this lay behind his evangelistic work: "If you repent of your sins and accept Jesus Christ as your personal lord and savior, then God will be gracious to you." Small wonder that the evangelist was intense in his questions, given that grace was contingent on the conversion experience. Obviously, in this kind of piety conversion occupies a crucial role.

If we use the theological language which is rooted in Paul, we would say of this piety that it links conversion with justification. Justification is the legal-forensic transaction whereby Christ's forgiveness and righteousness is imputed or assigned by God to sinful people.

The popular piety which we are exploring is well-aware of justification's gracious nature and the futility of personal achievement through good works as a means of earning God's acceptance. Despite this, the popular piety which I encountered and which is widespread in North America, retains

a trace of contingency in its idea of justification. This contingency is located in the believer's appropriation of the free gift. A kind of "work" clings to the reception of grace which in turn suggests that justification is not entirely divorced from human efforts.

Faith in much popular thinking is a volitional act-- receiving Christ. Much popular evangelism encourages prospective converts to "accept Christ." Further, revivalistic movements often routinize conversion, giving the impression that God's graceful acceptance of a person is not effective until he or she performs a rather precise set of behaviors. Most Americans are aware of these. To be "saved," the sinner must accept an evangelistic invitation to walk forward in the special worship service, kneel, recite a prescribed prayer, and receive water baptism. In some places additional behaviors function informally as prerequisites to receiving God's grace. These might include emotional intensity, the display of charismatic gifts, confession of sins, or the sharing of "testimonies."

A concomitant byproduct of the view which we're explor- ing is an anxious, burdened practice of evangelism. When salvation hinges on the believer's work of conversion, whether this means making a decision or holding a certain opinion, then the work of coaxing such experiences takes on a panicky urgency. Again, most Americans are familiar with

coercive evangelism efforts which make "decisions" more important than the people themselves. Perhaps the evangelist's methods and demeanor betrays as well as anything the precise theology that drives his or her efforts.

II. THE PLAN OF THIS CHAPTER

I've lingered over what seems to be the operative theology of conversion in much evangelical piety. I've done this to make clear by contrast a Reformed view of conversion's place in the Christian experience. Sketching a Reformed theology of conversion will occupy this chapter's next section. To anticipate: the Calvinistic tradition locates conversion on the sanctification side of the justification-sanctification duality. This is clear throughout Calvin's <u>Institutes</u>. It is expanded in Barth's <u>Church Dogmatics</u>.[57]

Once we've located conversion as a fruit of God's sanctifying grace, we will be in a position to understand yet one more reason why conversion is not very operative in contemporary Presbyterian Churches. This is because sanctification--while a central element in traditional Reformed theology--is minimized in the contemporary Mainline Church. To over-simplify, Presbyterian laypeople are more likely to get the impression in their congregation that they need to accept their present being rather than yearning for

transformation.   This attitude, whose sources are many, is largely an outgrowth of the individualism and privatization of American religion which consigns religion to caring for the world's casualties rather than challenging the world's assumptions.[58]

The chapter will conclude by returning to my adult study project, "Conversion In Retrospect." My conviction is that as we understand conversion within the framework of Reformed theology, we will, at the same time, be drawing conclusions about conversion--its nature and importance--which are remarkably compatible with what we've said in the first two chapters. This, in turn, provides yet more warrant for conducting the adult class on conversion in the way that I did.

   III.   A REFORMED VIEW OF JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION

Introduction

We've begun with a familiar popular conversion theology which gives the impression that the second birth experience operates in the realm of justification. I've begun with this view because it is familiar and because it serves as a useful contrast to the Reformed position. We now turn to Calvin's Institutes for a fuller discussion of the field into which conversion falls, namely his analysis of human fallenness and his view on how Christian faith lifts people from their

plight.   I choose Calvin's work because he lays out his
exposition   of   justification   and   sanctification   with
particular precision.   This, in turn, has influenced Reformed
theologians ever since.   Thus, when we turn to the 20th
century theologian, Karl Barth, we find Calvin's scheme still
guiding the way.   Happily for our work in this chapter,
Barth's Church Dogmatics include under the major sub-section
on sanctification a significant "paragraph" on conversion.
Later in this chapter we will return Barth.

John Calvin

First, to Calvin whose logic begins in his diagnosis of
the human condition.   Calvin finds that a double plight
weighs upon humanity.   Both problems are aspects of sin and
both trace their origin to Adam.   The first problem is best
phrased in courtroom language.   Says Calvin,

> First, we are so vitiated and perverted in every
> part of our nature that by this great corruption we
> stand justly condemned and convicted before God to
> whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness,
> innocence, and purity.[59]

Calvin moves on to describe how this first forensic-legal
problem "which seems to be a heredity depravity"[60] gives rise
to actual behaviors in the sinner's life.

> Original sin...also brings forth in us those works
> which Scripture calls "works of the flesh" [Gal.
> 5.19].   And it is properly what Paul often calls

sin.   The works that come forth from it--such as adulteries, fornications, thefts, hatreds, murders, carousings--he accordingly calls "fruits of sin..."[61]

Calvin proceeds to explain that for the double problem there is a double cure--justification and sanctification. Justification means, to use Calvin's words, that a person

is said to be justified in God's sight who is both reckoned righteous in God's judgment and has been accepted on account of his righteousness.[62]

For Calvin, the Christian response to humanity's guilt problem before God is couched in forensic terminology. God is judge and the sinner stands accused. The sinner's acquittal is based on the assignment or imputation of Christ's righteousness to the accused.

It is important to understand that Calvin decisively removes any good works, innocence, or ethical behaviors from justification. Jonathan Rainbow articulates this as follows: The key to the Reformation doctrine of justification is the concept of imputation. Justifying righteousness is imputed righteousness...It also isolates justifying faith from all the other virtues which otherwise accompany faith. It severs justifying righteousness and justifying faith from any personal ethical behavior.[63]

Distinct from, but always present with, justifying grace

is a second form of grace which we will call sanctifying grace. It is in this realm that we find human activity which answers and responds to God's prior loving activity. Says Calvin:

> ...We receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.[64]

By setting forth a twofold scheme of grace, Calvin preserves justification as wholly God's act which never entails nor responds to any sort of human work. And he gives sanctification distinct significance. In Calvin's view, justification is not the end of God's work on humans' behalf. There is a second grace, sanctification. This progressively makes real in sinners' lives the righteousness which has already been declared about them.

This two-fold scheme distinguishes Calvin from the kind of thinking characteristic of Luther. The latter holds the whole of the Christian life as an unqualified act of gratitude for one's prior justification. In this view, justification is greater and prior to sanctification. Indeed, for Luther, sanctification is rooted in justification like a branch growing from a root.[65] For Calvin, sanctification stands on its own ground alongside justification. In tandem, they constitute God's work of

salvation.

It is important to see these as connected like two sides of the same coin. Clearly, one without the other can be disastrous. Sanctification without justification becomes Christian legalism; justification alone invites ethical laxity which abandons all concern for personal holiness, justice, and righteousness in the world.

How does sanctification work in Calvin's vision? To begin with, it originates in God's prior move towards a person. As such it is grace. Just as justification begins with God's initiative, sanctification begins with God's activity eliciting some sort of response in his people. It is not rooted in human initiative.

More specifically, the grace of sanctification--like justification--originates in Christ. It is Christological. Both Calvin, and Barth after him, move quickly in their discussion of the Christian life to discussion of the life in Christ. Calvin puts it this way:

> ...He in every respect took our place to pay the price of our redemption...The second effect of Christ's death upon us is this: by our participation in it, his death mortifies our earthly members so that they may no longer perform their functions; and it kills the old [person] in us that [we] may not flourish and bear fruit...Therefore, in Christ's death and burial a twofold blessing is set forth for us to enjoy: liberation from the death to which we have been bound, and mortification of our flesh.[66]

Karl Barth

Karl Barth makes a similar move in his exposition of sanctification. In his Church Dogmatics, Volume Four, Part Two, he begins by discussing the inter-relationship between justification and sanctification. Then he launches into a section titled, "The Holy One and the Saints." Like Calvin before, Barth sees the process of sanctification as the "participation of the saints in the sanctity of Jesus Christ."[67]

Sanctification in Reformed understanding, like justification, is Christological. It takes its beginnings in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Further, because sanctification is distinct, though not separate, from justification it receives fresh emphasis in the Reformed tradition. The holy life enjoys particular prominence in Calvinistic circles, and Calvin himself may rightfully be called the theologian of sanctification.

Discipleship in the Gospel According to Mark

A brief exegetical digression will underscore the correctness of the orientation represented by these ideas. Among the greatest theological insights of all time--and one of the least celebrated--was the discovery that the Christian life was best described by retelling the story of Jesus' earthly career. Credit for this goes to the anonymous author

of the Gospel According to Mark, the first example of the "gospel" genre.[68] This theologian recognized the linkage between Christology and the kind of life which arose in response. Prior to his writing, stories about Jesus tended to be collected according to types. There were collections of miracle stories, pronouncement stories, esoteric sayings, and, of course, passion narratives. Various Jesus traditions gave rise to distinctive communities. For instance, communities which treasured Jesus' apocalyptic disclosures tended to be closed and secretive. Mark's genius was his recognition that Jesus' life entailed a multiplicity of encounters, episodes, and sayings which culminated with his passion and resurrection.

By putting together a narrative of Jesus' career, one which moves from scene to scene, Mark presents a multidimensional Christology. Jesus is not simply a miracle worker or dispenser of wisdom. He also is a definitive sign of the Kingdom's presence and he is fully revealed in his suffering and death.

Mark's narrative also features disciples who move with Jesus from scene to scene, following the contour of Jesus' life and facing Jesus' fate. In Mark's vision, discipleship is the appropriate human response to the arrival of the Kingdom represented by Christ's presence in the world. In discipleship, Jesus' followers themselves are transformed and

are agents of God's transformation of the world. In Mark, however, the disciples' transformation is hardly satisfactory and is fraught with disappointments. Nevertheless, by the end of Mark's story, the reader has little doubt that discipleship equates to the Christian life. Thus, the style of life to which Mark is inviting the reader is one which is transformed at the initiative of, through the example of, by the teachings of, and in the company of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Throughout Mark's story, the cross--Christ's and the disciple's--looms as the ultimate experience of transformation to be undertaken. Significantly, the cross is located at the end of the story rather than the beginning. In Mark's gospel the cross is not interpreted as the means of atonement which serves as the ground of God's acceptance of the disciples. The justifying cross of Jesus is not significantly proclaimed in Mark. The sanctifying cross is. As such, it is certainly a form of grace in its transforming potential. This transformation applies to both the disciples and the world. For this reason Jesus urges those who wish to be his true disciples to imitate him in his faithfulness even to the extremity of the cross. The purpose of this is connected with Mark's apocalyptic vision. Just as Jesus' suffering inaugurates the end times, so does the suffering of disciples serve to advance the unfolding end times. So even

the cross in Mark is a sanctifying, rather than justifying symbol.

At the risk of imposing language on Mark which he did not use, I would assert that Mark is a textbook in the kind of sanctification which we have been discussing. The Christian life in Mark, as with Calvin, is altogether Christological. The disciples' transformation is their answering reaction to Jesus' initiative. Thus, Jesus calls them to discipleship. They answer. Jesus teaches. They learn. Jesus moves across the landscape. They follow. Jesus sends disciples to preach. They do so. Jesus renews the relationship in the resurrection and so on.

Where then does justification fit into Mark in our interpretation? Again, this is not a word which we find in the Gospel, but the reality it represents is implied through-out the narrative. Mysteriously, Jesus has made a gracious, prior commitment to the disciples. When Jesus calls the disciples, the relationship is his idea. Likewise, when he returns from the grave to re-establish communion with the disciples he does so out of a commitment or acceptance which neither earned by the disciples nor explained by the gospel writer. Justification is assumed.

IV. CONVERSION AS SANCTIFICATION

We are now in a position to understand how conversion is

rightfully an element in the realm of sanctification. As such it is a human answer to God's sanctifying grace. Calvin's use of the word, *conversion* is diffused throughout the Institutes where it is roughly synonymous with sanctification. For example, in the Institutes 2.5.9., Calvin is discussing how God works in people's hearts. Specifically, he is refuting arguments that assign responsibility for human transformation to human efforts. The ninth section is titled, "The work of conversion is not divided between God and [people]." Here conversion is coterminous with all of God's workings in our lives. It is not uncommon for Calvin's reader to encounter the words *sanctification*, *regeneration*, *repentance*, and *conversion* used almost interchangeably. So, while Calvin leaves little doubt that conversion is a work--or *the* work--of sanctification grace, he does not formally explore conversion as a distinct experience.

Karl Barth focuses on conversion as such, embedding it in his larger discussion on sanctification. The sequence of the subsections in the Dogmatics is revealing. Significantly, Barth's section, "The Awakening to Conversion" immediately follows the section, "The Call to Discipleship." It is first in Jesus' call to discipleship that "he discloses and reveals himself to a [person] in order to claim and sanctify him [or her] as his own, and as his witness in the

world."[69]   The "awakening to conversion," in turn is Barth's metaphor which describes how God's call reaches people and rouses them from the sleep of sin and death.

The metaphor of awakening, which has biblical roots, is particularly apt. It suggests the action of someone rousing a sleeper.   This metaphor preserves the idea that an awakening is initiated by someone other than the sleeper. Further, the sleeper's reaction is virtually automatic. It doesn't entail deliberation or will power. It is seemingly involuntary. By using this metaphor, Barth can illustrate how God, the waker, can initiate action in people which requires their response.

Clearly, Barth is discussing in this section one activity of the sanctifying grace of God.

> ...The conversion of [a person] is a decision of
> God for him [or her] which not only makes possible
> a corresponding decision of [the person] for God,
> the free act of [the person's] obedience, but makes
> this act and obedience real, directly causing it to
> take place.[70]

Barth describes conversion in ways both familiar to and illuminating to a contemporary reader. For example, the awakening is a jolt--a precipitous change. It often marks a starting point of discipleship. It represents significant disjunction from one's previous life. In his exposition, Barth moves on to clarify that this concept of conversion is not a merely private moment of individual change. It entails

all of one's relationships. Further, conversion is never a finished activity that disciples can look back on as an accomplished phase of their sanctification. Conversion continues to turn people and will continue. Christians perpetually live in conversion.

The closing words of Barth's section on conversion remind us how far we have come from the theology of the beach evangelist. God's acceptance of people is not conditioned by or a response to anything we do--even having a conversion experience. And even our work of transformation--that which we've called sanctification--is rooted in God's prior graceful initiative enabling us to hear Christ's call, awaken from our sleep, leave our nets, and journey in newness of life. Says Barth:

> It remains for us to know that in the whole capacity of our Christian existence we are borne by the great movement which he has fulfilled, and which far transcends all the measures of our movements; and therefore as those who are his to love him as the one who is ours--always and wholly and exclusively in response to the fact that he has first loved us.[71]

Conversion's Importance

By moving conversion out of the realm of justification and into the realm of sanctification, we implicitly raise the question of conversion's necessity. Its necessity is self-evident when Christians regard a conversion experience as the

point of entry into church membership, the sacraments, and presumably the grace of God. But what is conversion's necessity--or importance--when we view it in its rightful place as an element in human regeneration which is, like justification, a gift in its own right? This question is especially important for Presbyterian congregations where conversion has seemingly disappeared. Why an awakening jolt, to use Barth's words? Must the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit be stirring upheaval in Christian's lives when other forms of nurture and faith formation are in place? Must there be disjunction, a dislocating turnaround, a "metanoia" in its literal sense of fundamentally changing one's mind?

A careful reading of Barth suggests an answer. It is no accident that the metaphoric language which Barth uses to characterize conversion keeps returning to expressions like this one: "The sleep from which they awaken is the relentless downward movement consequent upon their sloth." Conversion, in Barth's description, is the alarm which rouses the insensible from their deadly natural drift away from God. It's like the car passenger's fervent cry when she discovers the driver nodding off at the wheel. Such an alarm can never be gentle or measured, nor can it wait to see if the driver will discover his sleepiness and correct the problem. The remedy is appropriate to the problem.

So it is with conversion. Barth's description of the

problem which conversion addresses, is extensively treated in the section on human sloth and misery which appears just before his section on sanctification. Sloth, for Barth, refers to human contentment with

> ...the low level of a self-enclosed being, thus being irremediably and radically and totally subject to [one's] own stupidity, inhumanity, dissipation and anxiety, and delivered up to his own death.[72]

Sloth is lassitude of the will and a determined denial of the crisis. As such, sloth becomes a kind of self-imprisonment because it is the disablement of desire. In this state, people drift through life indifferent to their created potential or their relationship with God. Sloth's consequence, of course, is death because it persists in ignoring God's call to freedom and life.

The sin of sloth is not amenable to slow, progressive cures. Sloth doesn't fade in the presence of the religious community. In fact, Barth asserts, the slothful person never boldly rejects the Church. The religious community furnishes a good hideout for the individual adrift in sloth.

> He [or she] will never seriously or basically reject altogether religion or piety in one form or another, nor will he finally or totally cease to exercise or practice them in an open or disguised form. On the contrary, an escape to religion, to adoring faith in a congenial higher being, is the purist and ripest and most appropriate possibility at which he grasps in his sloth, and cannot finally cease from grasping as a slothful man.[73]

Only when God's sanctifying grace takes the form of an awakening jostle, can a person drifting in sloth be roused and arrested in his or her downward movement. Hence, conversion. Conversion, as Barth describes it, is the form which sanctifying grace takes which answers and overcomes human sloth.

The answer then to our question--Why must God's sanctifying work stir upheaval?--is rooted in our analysis of the human condition.

Horace Bushnell and Christian Nurture

It is important to understand that sanctifying grace takes other forms in addition to the awakening which we're discussing. It is on this point that 19th century American theologian, Horace Bushnell, makes valuable contributions to this argument. Bushnell enjoys credit for being the father of the religious education movement in the United States[74] This reputation is largely due to Bushnell's energetic argument that children, through their rearing at home and in congregational life, can be introduced to the joys of the Christian life, instructed, and significantly transformed. This hardly sounds novel today. However, in Bushnell's time these assertions led him on a collision course with the revivalistic practices which absolutized conversion as practically the sum of the Christian life. In this mentality, the Christian life did not begin in any meaningful

sense until a new birth experience instilled a new heart in the believer. Because conversion is often an adult phenomenon, this attitude placed the children of Christians in an awkward position. In the harsh view of the revivalist theology of the time, unconverted children were outside of God's grace and not rightfully Christians.[75]

Bushnell detected in parents and congregational practice a deplorable neglect of children's spiritual nurture as a result of this functioning theology. Instead of nurture, families prepared their children for, and relied on the hope of, an eventual revival of religion in their offspring. This, Bushnell found to be an inexcusable defection from parental duty:

> To bring up a family for revivals of religion requires, alas! about the smallest possible amount of consistency and Christian assiduity. No matter what opinion may be held of such times, or of their inherent value and propriety as pertaining to the genuine economy of the gospel, any one can see that Christian parents may very easily roll off a great part of their responsibilities, and comfort themselves in utter vanity and worldliness of life, by just holding it as a principal hope for their children, that they are to be finally taken up and rescued from sin, by revivals of religion[76]

The bulk of <u>Christian Nurture</u> sets forth the caretaking environment, namely children's family and church, as an avenue of God's grace. The chapters flesh out the various ways that parenting, infant baptism, early Church membership, family traditions and practices can become early means of

grace.

   Much of what Bushnell writes is a sharp polemic against the then widespread mentality which left to conversion the entire work of christianizing the populace. It is important to note that Bushnell, himself redirected by a religious revival which swept Yale in 1831, does not discount conversion's significance. In arguing for the advance of Christianity through family propagation, Bushnell states:

> The whole scheme of organic unity in the family and of family grace in the church, is just what it should be, if the design were to propagate religion, not by conversion only, but quite as much or more by the populating force embodied in it...[77]

While Bushnell does not explicitly lay out a theology of "double grace" as we have here, his argument's main thrust is congenial with what we've said. First, he is not willing to consign children to the company of the unregenerate for lack of a conversion. This preserves the idea of justification which proclaims God's acceptance as pure grace, a grace which undoubtedly is shed upon children. Second, Bushnell is keenly aware of what we've called "sanctifying grace" which utilizes a variety of situations and human efforts--among them family nurture and conversion--to make effective in people's lives the righteousness that has been imputed to them.

   Finally, Bushnell's argument against absolutizing conversion as the only means of transformation is not unlike

the argument here. I insist that we not absolutize those means of grace which are not conversion.

V. CONVERSION AND MAINLINE CHURCHES

Introduction

In my first two chapters, I offered two reasons why conversion and talk about conversion is scarce in Presbyterian churches. First, conversion, as a spiritual experience, seems too private and personal to discuss. For Presbyterians, it carries enough negative associations to prevent it from becoming a matter of easy conversation. Second, *conversion* is a nettlesome and complex idea which is difficult to pin down. Often those who speak most about conversions hold a limited and limiting idea of the experience. As such, it functions as much to exclude people's experience as it does to invite them into personal renewal.

To these two reasons for conversion's scarcity we are now ready to add a third. As an element of God's sanctifying grace, conversion belongs to a category of experience which has significantly deteriorated in the functioning theology of Mainline churches, namely sanctification.

In countless mainline congregations, persistence and incisiveness in declaring the Gospel's diagnosis of a

person's predicament are somewhat eclipsed by ministries of support and care for members in their loneliness and other struggles.   In turn, the rigorous proclamation of God's sanctifying work--God's transformation of believers--has been significantly muted.   Gently holding members in their struggles has significantly displaced ministries designed to awaken them from the downward drag of their sloth and sin. Not surprisingly, successful churches are often measured by their programs which attempt to meet personal needs--parenting classes, day care centers, singles' ministries, youth programs, exercise groups, and the like.   Tending to the casualties of our times or supporting persons in their own growth agenda occupies relatively more congregational energy than calling members to change.

Ronald White[78] has pointed out that from the 1960's forward Presbyterians have increasingly located society's problems in structures and institutions rather than individuals. Accordingly, social ministries designed to correct these have garnered more attention than, say, evangelism. While my interest is more precisely with conversion rather than evangelism, the shift in emphasis which White discusses is an aspect of what I'm attempting to characterize.   It may still be true that individuals are fettered by their own sloth and misery.   However, we in the Church are much more aware of how people are damaged by deteriorating

neighborhoods, family breakdown, business place upheaval, consumerism, racism, and sexism. Ministering to people's wounds while calling them to change requires more poise than we are often able to muster.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Cheap Grace"

One point of entry into the declining attention to individual change which I'm describing is found in the first chapter of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, Cost of Discipleship.[79] In this context, Bonhoeffer coins the phrase "cheap grace." Cheap grace refers to the situation in Protestant churches where the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed as a general truth, but is never answered by the human counter-movement of discipleship and transformation. Bonhoeffer is helpful in his analysis because he expresses the malaise of Protestant churches theologically. In a word, the problem is the disconnection of justification and sanctification. I'm struck by the haunting familiarity of Bonhoeffer's description of this Protestant dilemma even from Germany in the late 1930's.

> Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church dis-cipline, Communion without confession absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.[80]

Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*

As we move a half century forward and into American culture, the situation lamented by Bonhoeffer worsens in many congregations. Robert Bellah and his associates offer an interesting and thorough analysis of how American "individualism" has colored and influenced virtually every phase of American society, including our understanding of Christian faith.

First, the authors paint a general picture of how most Americans view personal growth and self-fulfillment. In a word, the great task for Americans is to "find oneself."[81]

> Clearly, the meaning of one's life for most Americans is to become one's own person, almost to give birth to oneself. Much of this process, as we have seen, is negative. It involves breaking free from family, community, and inherited ideas.[82]

In a subsequent chapter, the authors quote a psychotherapist who describes human transformation as a vegetative process:

> The image is that a healthy person is a plant, and that you never stop growing. Most of us don't need tomato stakes. We're basically good, and so with enough sunshine and water, we'll grow beautifully. You can grow in any direction and that adds to the variety of the world. That goes counter to the whole puritanical side of America, that there's one way of life and we're gonna fit you into it. Therapy is like the democratic side. If you become a unique person and grow in a different direction, that helps you, everybody, and society, too.[83]

Bellah's work helps us understand how Presbyterians are likely to be thinking about transformation.

> Of course, not everyone in America or everyone to
> whom we talked believes in an unencumbered self
> arbitrarily choosing its "values," "entirely in-
> dependent" of everyone else. We talked to Chris-
> tians and Jews for whom the self makes sense in
> relation to a God who challenges, promises, and
> reassures. We even talked to some for whom the
> word *soul* has not been entirely displaced by the
> word *self*. We talked to those for whom the self
> apart from history and community makes no sense at
> all. To them, a self worth having only comes into
> existence through participation with others in the
> effort to create a just and loving society. But we
> found such people often on the defensive,
> struggling for the biblical and republican language
> that could express their aspirations, often
> expressing themselves in the very therapeutic
> rhetoric that they consciously reject. It is a
> rhetoric that educated middle-class Americans, and,
> through the medium of television and other mass
> communications, increasingly all Americans, cannot
> avoid.[84]

Sanctification as we've discussed is essentially the

authoritative operation of God's grace upon the believer.

Conversional change is the operation of God's grace over

against the natural drift of a human life. Conversion

arrests the vegetative development of the self and calls it

to something to which it could never call itself. As such,

conversion is fundamentally different than the quest to find

oneself.

Bellah and his associates included with their analysis a

penetrating critique to the individualistic ideal of the

human quest. For one, finding meaning solely within oneself

is highly relativistic and promises in the end to bring one's

life into conformity with nothing greater than one's own desires and feelings. Further, the quest is largely negative. The individuating process is dominated by repudiating the objective values of home, culture, church, and so on.

> In this situation, every life crisis, not just that of adolescence, is a crisis of separation and individuation, but what the ever freer and more autonomous self is free *for* only grows more obscure. Thinking about the life course in this way may exacerbate rather than resolve the problem of the meaning of the individual life.[85]

Later in Habits of the Heart, the authors turn their attention to the implications of American individualism on American religion. They develop the thesis that the traditional authority which the local congregation exercises over individual members has broken down. Traditionally, the religious community has been a given in a person's life. In stable communities, people didn't enjoy having a choice of congregation together with its theology. "For Americans, the traditional relationship between the individual and the religious community is to some degree reversed."[86] Bellah moves on to cite a 1978 Gallup Poll which found that 80 percent of Americans agreed that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues."[87]

Without much imagination we can press this line of

thinking to some striking conclusions. To the extent that Americans develop their belief system and then affiliate with a like-minded congregation, churches loose persuasive authority to summon people to change. If the basis on which a person unites with a congregation is compatibility with that person's thinking and style of life, then the church violates that contract when it calls that person to fundamental change.

Bellah moves on to a small case study of one Art Townsend, pastor of a Presbyterian Church in San Jose, California. Admittedly, Art Townsend is an extreme example. However, his attitudes represent how thoroughly even a Presbyterian church can accommodate to members in their present state rather than calling for change. Says the pastor:

> The church is really a part of me and I am a part of the church, and my shift professionally has gone from "how can I please them and make them like me so that I can keep my job and get a promotion' to 'how can I love them, how can I help these beautiful, special people to experience how absolutely wonderful they are."[88]

Art Townsend is so thoroughly convinced of the present tense wonder of his congregants that he actively dampens any impulse that may arise in them to change. In his words, they need to "lighten up."[89] He sees himself functioning to "help them take the scales from their eyes and experience and see

their magnificence."[90]   Apparently, these parishioners are not "irremediably and radically and totally subject to [their] own stupidity, inhumanity, dissipation and anxiety..." as Barth puts it.

The point of this exploration into Bonhoeffer and then Bellah's thinking is to suggest how personal transformation is thought of in many segments of American society. And the extent to which "Art Townsend" is representative of attitudes in Presbyterian churches is the extent that conversional transformation is alien to us as well.

The Presbyterian Church which I serve houses four Twelve-step groups which meet on week nights. I find it helpful to compare the groups' attitudes towards personal change with attitudes in our congregational life. For the Twelve-step groups, forthright discussion and acknowledgment of the addictive problem is a hallmark. These groups don't flinch at what must be, for their members, the most entrenched and embarrassing of problems. It is at the Twelve-step group meeting that denial is set aside to clear the way for rescue and change. This transformation bears a resemblance to conversion. It entails awakening, reliance on God, contrition, and community.

In my congregation, such clear-eyed acknowledgment of our need for transformation, our reliance on a Source outside of ourselves, and our mutual support of one another are not

nearly so prominent or vital. Admittedly, to some degree, the comparison is unfair. An addictive problem such as alcoholism is dramatically obvious. It would radicalize a gathering of alcoholics around the task of sobriety. Nevertheless, the contrast between group and congregation leaves me wondering if we have borrowed too much from our culture and neglected the Reformed vision of sanctification and conversion through the grace of God.

VI.   THE ADULT STUDY PROJECT:

Locating conversion in the realm of sanctification rather than justification gives us more than another insight into why Presbyterians don't talk about it. Separating conversion from justification liberates us from several assumptions which cling to conversion and skew our understanding of it. We have seen, for example, that God's grace which receives people and imputes Christ's righteousness to them, is not conditioned by any work or merit. Thus, having a conversion experience or being converted is not to be construed as the single, indispensable threshold into such grace. Rather, conversion is one aspect of God's sanctifying grace. As such, conversion belongs to the Christian life. It is not a qualification for the Christian life.

My adult class, "Conversion in Retrospect," was entirely

dependent on this theology. The theological frame out of which we work and conversion's location in it exerts a surprising degree of influence on how we preach, discuss, generally regard conversion in congregational life. What follows are four ways that the Reformed perspective influenced my class.

1. By locating conversion in the realm of sanctification, we've removed any necessity that conversion mark the threshold into the Christian life. To be sure, many conversions are early awakenings which are a believer's response to a new sense of call or his or her alarm over sins. Conversion, however, may also take place years into one's spiritual journey. John Wesley, for instance, was not only a committed Christian, but even an evangelist, before his Aldersgate experience.

An important assumption for my class was that conversion is a possibility at any time in the Christian experience--not just the beginning.

2. A second implication of our understanding of conversion as sanctification is an elimination of conversion's indispensability. When God's acceptance is in any way contingent upon a new birth experience, repentance, or other conversional transformation, then, obviously, such an experience is indispensable. The Reformation doctrine of justification by grace, however, removes any possibility that

a person can manipulate or merit God's forgiveness and acceptance. But conversion does not influence justification. It is not necessary as a means to appropriate it.

I'm not suggesting that conversion is unimportant as God's graceful remedy to human sloth and determined indifference. But this grace--sanctifying grace--presumes the logically (not chronologically) prior reality of justification.

Eliminating the sense of conversion's indispensability permitted my class to contemplate it in a non-anxious, non-manipulative climate. We studied the Scriptures and shared our attitudes and experiences with conversion without the urgency that "souls were at stake." We proceeded with no agenda--hidden or exposed--to foster conversions. I suspect that this class was, for most participants, the longest sustained conversation about conversion which was not loaded with the intention that they actually have the experience.

It's important to recognize that there were some in the class who were practiced at resisting evangelistic pressures to be "born again," or "saved." In the same way that the class did not advocate conversion, neither did it fortify those who, for whatever reasons, wished to resist it.

In the second or third class, I took an informal survey of the learners and discovered that several of them had, as youth, responded to an evangelistic invitation in a worship

service. In the group conversation which followed, it became clear that these students had dismissed that experience as childish foolishness or the result of parental pressure. I'm guessing that conversion also, for these learners, had been relegated to a more innocent, unsophisticated time in their lives. I believe that for these students, participation in my class supported them in a thoroughgoing re-evaluation of conversion. This time they were thinking of it from an adult perspective. The absence of evangelistic pressure or opposition to such was largely responsible for this fresh new consideration.

3. The Reformed perspective which locates conversion as an element in God's sanctifying work, opens the possibility that conversion is not necessarily a single experience, but one which may be repeated.

Again, the theological perspective which informs this project disconnects conversion from some all-important moment or dramatic decision when a person's entire destiny is brokered. This same theological perspective reconnects conversion with the entire life in Christ. In other words, conversion takes its place as one among many transforming gifts given by God. In this understanding, conversional change may occur repeatedly--or better, continually.

Karl Barth offers much help on this point. Arguing that conversion is not "a matter for only one period in...life,"[91]

Barth emphasizes that conversion is best thought of as extending uninterrupted over the whole of life. The idea to be resisted is that conversion exists only in episodes or momentary times of awakening, surrounded by times which are not conversion. Like Calvin before him, Barth equates conversion with sanctification. He also acknowledges episodes where conversion seems intensified:

> Certain moments in the totality of the fulfillment of this act, certain impulses and illuminations, disturbances, changes and experiences which we undergo at particular times, may have the meaning and character of a particular recollection of its total content. But sanctification in conversion is not the affair of these individual moments; it is the affair of the totality of the whole life-movement of man [or woman]. To live a holy life is to be raised and driven with increasing definiteness from the center of this revealed truth, and therefore to live in conversion with growing sincerity, depth, and precision.[92]

And then:

> Now momentary events of this kind--either in the Romanist form of the reception of the sacrament of penance, or in the Pietist and Methodist form of a simple or more complex experience of conversion-- are not identical with conversion to God, because the latter is the totality of the movement of sanctification which dominates and characterizes human life--a movement in which there can be no breaks or pauses when conversion is no longer needed or only needed afresh, but when he [or she] might also propose to fulfill it for the second or third, or hundredth time. No matter whether they are understood sacramentally, emotionally, or ethically, individual moments of this kind, and all the specific liturgies and experiences and

conflicts and confessions and achievements of
penitence, can be understood only as particularly
prominent moments in the whole life-movement from
the old to the new [person].[93]

In light of this, we might say of my class that it was a
gathering of learners living in conversion. In our Scripture
study and sharing we revisited personal episodes, decisions,
awakenings, and the like in order to understand them freshly
as part of the whole grace-impelled movement from the old
person to the new.

One woman, who attended all of the class sessions,
shared a personal incident with the group in one of the final
sessions. She had recently felt a clear calling by God to
prepare to be a psycho-therapist. This calling came in the
form of a significant religious experience that struck her in
her present job. What prompted this sharing was the class's
study of Moses' calling. As we examined the text, it dawned
on this student that she and Moses had some things in common,
especially the daunting difficulty of the task to which they
were called. Suddenly, the incident in her office was not an
isolated inspiration, but an encounter with God's
sanctifying, converting grace. It suggested significance in
the incident which went beyond a vocational decision. In the
context of the class this experience took a place in what was
appearing to be a pattern of God's work in her life.

4. Finally--and we've argued for this point in the
first two chapters--when we remove conversion from the realm

of justification, we also remove any sense that conversion must take a certain or prescribed form. The theological perspective which holds that conversion affects justifying grace, logically needs to specify what counts as conversion. Revivalistic traditions which utilize conversions on a massive scale in order to christianize a population often have relied on a rigid sequence of steps in the conversion process. Theologians have called these "stereotyped" or "program" conversions.

When the whole of the Christian experience is seen as conversion, sometimes punctuated with intensified change or decision-making, also legitimately called "conversions," then conversion is a much more individual experience. When, as we've seen, conversion is not confined to one period in life, possibly repeated, and not indispensable, then all kinds of religious experiences might arguably be thought of as conversion.

Everything about the class, "Conversion in Retrospect" seemed to move the learners away from stereotyping this experience or idea. The biblical texts presented a variety of experiences which might be called "conversion." The class's work of listing conversion's facets, underscored the variety of forms which conversion takes. The homework reading of <u>Conversions</u> introduced yet another variety of conversion experiences. And the students sharing of their

own religious experiences confirmed conversion's multiplicity. The movement away from stereotyping conversion pervaded the class experience. What I am asserting here is that our theological understanding of conversion is compatible with this.

VII. CONCLUSION

This chapter has endeavored to show that the location of religious conversion in our theological framework has profound influence on how we discuss, assess, remember, and feel about it. When conversion is instrumental in the justification of persons, then unparalleled urgency clings to it. It becomes less a topic for discussion and more a necessity to be preached. What counts as conversion is standardized. For faith communities committed to this stance, conversion rightly fills the horizon. The requisite experience becomes the threshold into the Christian life and a marker of the faithful. For lay adults to gather in a Sunday School class and share opinions, feelings, experiences around conversion would be folly. Such an open-ended process risks the possibility that the learners would miss the importance of and necessary steps involved in this all-important event.

When conversion is linked with the grace of sanctification, not influencing God's graceful turn towards persons,

but characterizing God's turning of persons toward Godself, then our regard for it can be entirely different. Conversion as an element in and characterization of sanctification need not be a single event nor conform to a pattern. Conversion looses an oppressive seriousness when salvation does not hang on it. This perspective makes useful the adjectives, "conversional" or "conversionist." Some experiences in the life in Christ jostle or awaken and are thus, conversional. We commonly call such experiences, "conversions." However, as both Calvin and Barth insist, full conversion, the complete renewal of a person, is only accomplished in the "whole life-movement" of sanctification.

When we hold conversion in this theological context, we can approach it and educate ourselves about it in the manner we used in my class. We can explore its meaning--as we did--without first rigidly defining it. We can share thoughts about and experiences of conversion without concern for being found in the wrong or mistaken.

Most importantly, we can do all of this in the context of the faith community. This is because conversion is an experience of the Christian life rather than a qualification for the Christian life. We can study and share together in community knowing that conversion is for the whole of the Christian life and therefore ever-relevant to Christians.

It is to the study and learning about conversion in the

Church that we now turn.

CHAPTER FOUR

LEARNING ABOUT CONVERSION IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

I. GLADYS' STORY

My class, "Conversion in Retrospect," came along three years too late for Gladys. I conducted her funeral in May of 1991. Actually, the class was more like five years too late for Gladys. After decades of faithful participation, Gladys' frail health prevented her from attending worship. I saw her regularly in those last two years as she moved from apartment to nursing home to hospital.

Gladys serves, in my mind, as an object lesson for the faithful use of old age in service to Christ's Kingdom. She dedicated her life's final months to her devotions, charitable giving, listening to the Scriptures on audio tape, and telephoning a sizable list of elderly friends. Her apartment was filled with books on the Christian life. She also enjoyed consulting me on a range of topics from the Dead Sea Scrolls to media ministers.

One afternoon, Gladys shared with me her anxiety over the fact that she had not undergone a second birth experience. Ralph, her deceased husband, felt that he had

been "born again" years before. But such an experience never came to Gladys. She had worried about this for years. I learned this from several old timers in the congregation. Gladys had prayed for the experience. She had scanned her life for some forgotten sin which may be separating her from God. Finally, with her years spent and her health declining, Gladys resigned herself to the possibility that God had not deemed her worthy.

Hopefully, what I said to this troubled parishioner gave her some peace of mind about her own experience. Even better for Gladys than my hastily assembled thoughts as I sat on her couch, would have been an opportunity for her to participate in our class on "Conversion in Retrospect." I thought of Gladys frequently during the class's eight week span. Twice I mentioned her in the lessons. I wish that she had gotten the support of her congregation in interpreting and prizing her experiences with God. I wish she could have listened to our guests' stories in the first class session because I imagine that much of Gladys' conception of conversion was shaped by such reports. I wish Gladys could have contributed some of her own ideas of conversion to the list of facets collected on newsprint. This would have exposed her working definition and operative theology to modification and enrich- ment by the Scriptures. I wish that Gladys could have tested her ideas of the second birth--ideas which caused her dis-

tress--with the various texts which we studied. Finally, I wish that Gladys could have heard the other participants as they shared their own stories, their personal turning points, and rich encounters with God. While I have no way of knowing in advance what one person's experience of our class would be, my fantasy is that for Gladys the class would have been a means of grace. It might have lifted from her the burden of conversion-as-requisite-experience.

II. THE PLAN OF THIS CHAPTER

Of course, Gladys did not attend the class. And I cannot think of a single participant who brought to the class the same concerns and questions that she might have. So far as I could tell, each participant brought different needs and curiosities to the eight sessions. I'm guessing that a few participants had no particular interest in conversion at all. Some of these attended the sessions out of loyalty to me, the pastor, who needed the people for an academic project. Others attended out of their Sunday morning habit. These would have been present for any adult education offering. How would such a class affect them? Perhaps the class would have been helpful for Gladys. But what justifies my belief that such a class can be a strategy to support Presbyterians in the variety of their relationships with conversion?

The question, then, given all that we have said about

conversion and given the participants' variety of needs, is why did I choose to address both in a classroom? Other pastoral strategies such as preaching or pastoral care were certainly available. More specifically, why did I choose this particular style or model of classroom experience? Again, other models such as independent learning or group process classes were available.

This chapter addresses these questions. My aim here is to show how this project allows Presbyterians in all their diversity of experience and outlook, to explore religious conversion, with all its complexity and emotional freight. We will begin by discussing the minister's role in teaching in the Reformed Tradition. This will provide an orientation to the importance of knowledge and learning in the Presbyterian congregation. After this, our focus will narrow to identifying and describing our particular class's nature--the model--in educational terminology. This will furnish the reader with a snapshot of the classroom activity to be elaborated upon in Chapter Five.

Following our description of the model, we will consider in turn the class's major components--learners, setting, and teacher--to understand their role in the process. A fourth component--the subject--we have been considering all along in the first three chapters. My contention is that, taken together, these factors argue for, at least in theory, the

use of the classroom model which I have chosen.[94]   We'll
review the class's actual happenings and results in the final
two chapters.

III.   TEACHING IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

At the risk of over-simplification, biblical faith
revolves around two foci.   The first is God's present
activity in encountering people. The second is the record of
God's past encounters with people. Each makes the other in-
telligible.   For example, in the midst of Moses' religious
experience at the burning bush, the self-revealing deity
identified the deity's self as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and
Jacob.   This is one of many instances where knowledge of the
past illuminates what God is doing in the present.   The
opposite is also true.   For instance, Jesus' resurrection
appearances cast new light and significance on most of what
he did up to and including the crucifixion.   Here, God's new
revelation illuminates the believer's understanding of the
past.

Roughly corresponding with this dialectic, are the
ministries of teaching and preaching. Both are ways in which
the faithful community conveys its knowledge of and relation-
ship with God.   They often merge as when the minister
explains something during the homily.   When they diverge,
preaching is distinguished from teaching in that it announces

God's present activity in the face of people's need and disbelief. Teaching is distinctive in explaining or making intelligible what has been preached.

That these twin forms of conveying the Gospel or Israel's tradition are rooted in the very nature of biblical faith is evidenced by the fact that they both are present throughout the Scriptures.

James Smart has asserted that Israel was sustained by the twin ministries of prophecy and teaching. The former was notably set forth by the prophets; the latter, in home life.[95]

Even the casual reader of the Old Testament cannot help but notice the prominence of prophetic literature on its pages. The Prophetic books are the records of a certain kind of consciousness inherent in Israel's faith. Prophecy, as Abraham Heschel elegantly put it is an "exegesis of existence from a divine perspective."[96] Prophecy then is announcement of God's unfolding judgment and the working out of God's intentions in history.

Paralleling this in Old Testament tradition is a strong teaching tradition through which people could understand God's present tense unfolding activity. Nowhere is the role of teaching in the faith community better characterized than in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy. Here YHWH, speaking through Moses, recites all that YHWH has and will do for the

people. In response, the people are to love the Lord, bear upon their hearts the commandments, and *teach* them through every conceivable mode to their children.[97] Loving God and teaching are twin responses to God's deliverance.

As time passed, Israel accumulated a larger and larger deposit of stories, prophetic writings, and theological reflection about their changing circumstances. These, of course, were Israel's teachable heritage. By Jesus' time, the scribal tradition with its teaching agenda had supplanted the living prophetic tradition which announced God's present tense activity.[98]

The marriage of preaching and teaching was again embodied in Jesus' ministry. His contemporaries identified (or mistook) Jesus for one or the other. He was both. Jesus proclaimed the inbreaking advent of the Kingdom. And Jesus explained his proclamation and that which he embodied with rich parables, pronouncement stories, and memorable discourses.

Not surprisingly, this twofold teaching and preaching tradition continued with the Apostles, especially Paul.

The integration of these two means of conveying the Gospel continues to be the appropriate combination in the Church today. It is a defective circumstance where one or the other predominates. Where, for example, preaching--in the sense of announcement of God's present workings, will,

and love--is eclipsed by explanation, theologizing, and anti-quarian interests, then the community takes on a museum quality. The community is blighted by traditionalism, rigid orthodoxy, and institutionalism which subtly replaces the living God with the means for preserving the memory and understanding of God. The situation where announcement supplants teaching, on the other hand, is also where momentary excitement and experience tyrannize the fellowship. One thinks of the disciples' misunderstanding in the face of Jesus' mountaintop transfiguration. Only when placed in the context of what Jesus was teaching his disciples was their overwhelming religious experience fully meaningful. Hence, "...listen to him."

Given these twin means for sharing knowledge of God in the community of faith--Christ's Church, for our purposes--we are in a position to describe teaching's role in the Christian fellowship. Teaching in the Church provides intelligibility and depth to experience. By *experience* I mean primarily the disciple's experience of God. *Experience* can also mean the believer's experience of fellowship and mission. Teaching engages the believer's understanding with all else that happens in Christian experience, be that spiritual, emotional, volitional, or relational experience. Teaching is ultimately one of the ways that the Church assists people to respond knowledgeably to God's self-

offering and call to obedience. Teaching assists believers to love God with all of their minds, which is to say to respond to God with more of their entire selves. Says John Leith,

> What cannot be thought through critically and expressed with reasonable clarity cannot demand the allegiance of a [person's] whole being.[99]

Ultimately then teaching is about loving God.

As we've affirmed elsewhere in this report, teaching in the community of faith doesn't only happen in a classroom with a teacher presiding. Teaching happens in practically everything that goes on in the Church. Liturgy, preaching, mission experience, even committee work can convey a kind of religious education. Much teaching, in other words, is acculturation and is not intentional.

The Reformed movement is particularly noted among traditions for its focus on theology and education in the formal sense. This emphasis is due to the Reformer's experiences of liberal arts university studies and the central place occupied by the Word of God in Reformed theological writing. In turn, formal education and educational institutions have been closely associated with the Reformed movement through its history.

A further result of this focus on theology is an emphasis on intentional learning within congregational life. John Calvin set the tone for this in many ways, two of which

we'll note here. First, he affirmed that teaching is essential to the minister's work. The Reformed pastor of a congregation is, among other things, the Church's teacher.[100] Second, Calvin required Church members to master the catechism as a condition for admission to the Lord's Table.[101] Calvin's vision here, whether or not ever realized, was of a congregation composed entirely of informed, critically thoughtful members.

The centrality of God's Word in the Reformed Tradition together with attendant emphases on theology and education, carries implications for the Reformed pastor--the minister of Word (and Sacrament). For Calvin and the Reformed Fathers, ministers are God's provision to the congregation through which God gives the people assistance in hearing and under-standing God's Word. Herein is the minister's authority. This is not to suggest that ministers cease being feeble, sinful human beings. Says Calvin:

> Authority...is wholly given not to the [ministers] personally, but to the ministry to which they have been appointed or (to speak more briefly) to the Word, whose ministry is entrusted to them. For if we examine them all in order, we shall not find that they have been endowed with any authority to teach or to answer except in the name and Word of the Lord.[102]

In the Reformed view, then, the minister--who is a key teacher in the congregation--has a unique purpose. This office of guardianship of the Word is not dispensable or of

small importance. Indeed, in Calvin's argument against Roman hierarchy, he asserts that congregational ministers are the rightful successors to the Apostles and in their function, rather than status, to exercise apostolic authority.

Because the Reformed pastor's authority derives from his or her function as teacher and proclaimer of the authoritative Word of God, competence and earnestness in this function are essential. Ministers, in fellowship with their ministerial peers, are guardians of doctrine and biblical interpretation.

From this concept of the Reformed pastor's authority, we can begin to see the shape of the minister's teaching presence in the congregation. It is helpful to compare the Reformed pastor with another well-known educator--the public school teacher. The school teacher generally is a master in conveying to students the designated curriculum. His or her province in the educational process is predominately in the classroom. In this setting the teacher's lecture and discussion techniques, together with interaction with students is the heart of the teacher's vocation. The development of curriculum together with determining the truthfulness, appropriateness, and value of what is taught, is the responsibility of a larger group of administrators, school board, and even culture as a whole.

Pastors, in contrast, are called to keep God's Word from

impairment or distortion and to convey it to others intelligibly and with sensitivity. Their teaching vocation is therefore broader than that of public school teachers. Pastors may, and probably should, be active in classroom teaching in the congregation. But even if the minister doesn't teach--in the narrow sense of presiding in a classroom--he or she is still charged with oversight and leadership of congregational learning. To illustrate from my situation--the decision that conversion was a necessary topic for my congregation to study was an exercise of pastoral teaching authority.

I've taken pains to identify the Reformed minister's teaching authority as one of function, not personal status. While discharging this vocation, the pastor never ceases to be a human being. Says Calvin:

> ...This is the best and most useful exercise in humility, when he accustoms us to obey his Word, even though it be preached through [persons] like us and sometimes even by those of lower worth than we.[103]

The minister, in other words, is a channel through which God works to address all in the congregation. Presumed here is the capacity of the congregation to be engaged by God's Word. In other words, the high importance of the minister's function does not mean that he or she alone is addressed and called by that Word. That Word addresses the entire congregation, each member of which is responsible to receive,

understand, and appropriate it. "God alone is lord of the conscience"--so goes the first principle of Presbyterian Church order--"and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of [people]."[104]

The logic of the first principle is extended in the second principle: "Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable..."[105] The Reformed Tradition's high doctrine of the minister's teaching vocation is balanced with an emphasis on each disciple's personal responsibility to work out his or her personal comprehension and appropriation of God's truth.

The Reformed pastor's teaching is decidedly not the taking of responsibility for what congregants know and believe. Rather, teaching and learning in the Church is located where the minister's responsibility to proclaim and explain meets the individual's responsibility to know and understand.

In my class, "Conversion in Retrospect," I did not simply tell the participants what I thought they ought to understand about conversion. Rather, I coaxed them to engage the topic by reacting to the scriptural texts and verbalizing their opinions and sharing their experiences. Having provided a structure which asserted that conversion merited exploration and that certain texts provided illumination, I

then allowed students much latitude to discharge their responsibility to ponder and incorporate what they were learning. Hence the course's rhythm of lecture and discussion.

Once again, it is important to hold both the responsibility of the pastor together with that of the congregant. Just as it does not fall exclusively upon the minister-teacher to develop the beliefs of the parishioner-learners, neither are the learners entirely responsible to work out their own convictions and understanding of faith. Lacking the guidance, expertise, and vision of the pastor, the congregants flounder in superficiality and confusion. Says Edward Dowey:

> Casual knowledge, or even the diligently pursued interests of lay people, will not suffice for the church in relation either to the Bible (where would we be without scholar-translators?) or to the worlds of culture, natural science, psychology, politics, and economics. The everyday reader of the Bible, like the man-in-the-street voter, can learn a lot. But a treadmill of superficiality results in both instances if finely trained minds and good leadership are not forthcoming. Unless fresh, firsthand work continues to inform both preaching and teaching, the message of the church will quickly come to have the quaint sound of old phonograph records.[106]

Even more perilous is the possibility that profound confusion can course through the Church's life when lay people are left entirely without pastoral leadership to

assist with sophisticated hermeneutical and theological issues. Christianity has bred more heresies than other faiths. This ought to remind us that what we believe is neither simple nor is the interpretation and application of the ancient texts of the Old and New Testaments within the capability of every lay person. Professionally trained, studious pastors are indispensable as guardians of sound doctrine within congregational life.

Finally, it must be said that the teaching-learning work of a congregation is distinguished from other educational enterprises by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The community of faith is unique because God has called it into being. As such it is a holy or set-apart entity different from natural clubs and organizations. Teaching and learning in such an environment benefits from the presence and power of the Spirit.[107] I structured into the goals of the class which is the subject of this report an assumption that the Holy Spirit would be active in many ways, especially guiding the participants' awareness of their own experiences with God.

IV. THE MODEL

Before discussing the educational model which informed my class it will be helpful to the reader to have a snapshot picture of the kinds of activities we undertook during our 12

hours together. In the first session, two guest presenters shared with the group their personal experience of Christian conversion. In the final half hour of the first session, class members suggested aloud facets or elements which they felt belonged to the concept of conversion. These, I the teacher captured on newsprint. This record, to which we returned frequently throughout the course for review and modification, constituted the class's collective understanding about or working definition of conversion.

The following six class periods each consisted of a textual study of a biblical conversion story. Following the Bible study, we revisited and revised the newsprint list of conversion's elements. During each class's final half hour, I encouraged participants to share with the group any reactions or personal stories which the study brought to mind. The final class was devoted to group interaction and reflection about the previous seven classes. For homework I encouraged learners to read Kerr and Mulder's book, <u>Conversions</u>,[108] between class periods.

The Information-Processing Approach

While my eight session course on "Conversion in Retrospect" did not conform slavishly to one of, say, Joyce and Weil's classic teaching models,[109] it was clearly a variety of the "information-processing" approach. Because each class

ran for ninety minutes, moving each half-hour to increased learner discussion, the final half hour was probably most comparable to one of the "group interaction" models.

The information-processing approach is teacher-directed both with respect to the content and the sequence of classroom activities. The teacher is responsible first to know, understand, organize, and present information. Then, he or she elicits student response. The teacher presentation of the subject content also demonstrates for students ways to think about or structure the concepts under study. The Bible study teacher, for instance, asks in class the kinds of questions that exegetes ask. Thus, how information and insights are structured, or not structured, conveys to the learners valuable insights into the subject.[110] In this model, or family of models, not only is the teacher responsible to be comfortably acquainted with the subject, but also with the learners' feelings and intellectual capacity.[111]

The information-processing approach serves learners by efficiently conveying to them what others before them have learned and remembered. Because much of Christian faith is the recollection of God's acts together with people's understanding of their encounter with God, the information-processing model has a clear role in propagating the learnable heritage of faith.

The Advance Organizer. The "advance organizer"[112] is a device that helps students tie the subject matter under study with their own past experience. Typically, the teacher will make a brief comment at the outset which assists the students in assimilating the lesson into their personal knowledge base. Before the first class, for example, I told a story about one of our past church members who worried because she never had a conversion experience. This was the advance organizer for the first class. It was designed to address the implicit question, "Why are we studying conversion and what does it have to do with me?" I used an advance organizer in each class to connect the lesson of the day with each student's existing knowledge or experience.

Group Interaction. A second element in my class's model was group discussion. In my class, discussion consumed approximately sixty minutes of each session. Group interaction, while teacher-supervised and reliant on his or her expertise, is essentially learner-directed. In this model, the class is open for discussion. Who speaks and what is discussed is unforeseeable.

This model of learning in groups presupposes that, when peoples' feelings and experiences are expressed and reacted to by the group, this interaction creates new understandings and commitments. Emotion is especially important in the

group interaction model. It supplies much motivation for sharing. Thus, one's place in the group, concern for one another's welfare, and the need to be understood are all factors in this model.

Group interaction learning has an important place in the faith community. Biblical tradition lodges truth in the matrix of the fellowship, be that the nation of Israel, the company of disciples, the nascent Church, or the contemporary congregation. Because Christians hold that community is the primary container of God's presence and work, group interaction is an especially promising format. In social interaction is an implicit invitation for God to renew God's presence and to transform those who together have opened themselves to such activity.

We turn now to the three components which, when taken together, make the design which I've described the appropriate vehicle for learning about conversion.

V. THE LEARNERS

The most fundamental consideration in designing any educational experience is the students' nature, capacity, needs, and interests. Daniel Aleshire draws the link between understanding the learner and effective teaching in relational terms. Valuing the student, he asserts, facilitates learning.[113] Gabriel Moran practically collapses human

development into educational development:

> 1.) Education needs the idea of development so that we might have better educational theorizing and 2.) development itself needs to be conceived of as educational or else it will not be an adequate account of human development.[114]

Leon McKenzie diagnoses the basic problem with conventional religious education as a failure to take into account adults' life situations.[115]

There exists a body of evidence which demonstrates that the life situation of adults is intimately connected with what they are willing and able to learn. When, for example, adults set out to learn something on their own they usually choose topics that pertain to some aspect of their lives. Much less often will they venture into some entirely new area.[116] Researchers have also demonstrated that during life-cycle transitions adults seek coping strategies, often through learning.[117] It follows that religious educators would profit by paying attention to the details of in their students' everyday lives. Even student's most basic capacities must not be overlooked when considering class design. Educators should even consider hearing, vision, educational experience, scheduling availability, church background, and so on in order to design effective classes.

Understanding the learners enables the teacher find them in their situations in life and discern how they might be able and willing to move in what they know, believe, and can

do. Knowing adults is the heart of Malcolm Knowles' contribution to the understanding of adult learning. His comprehensive theory on adult learning, perhaps the most prominent, is founded on several insights into adults and their development. Adults, Knowles asserts, are 1) more self-directed and independent than children in learning, 2) have a reservoir of accumulated experience, 3) are oriented in learning around their own development issues, 4) are present-oriented while children are more future-oriented, and 5) are oriented towards problem-solving rather than toward subjects as with children.[118]

The alliance between understanding adults and teaching adults is so profound that our society-wide deepening of understanding of adult development parallels an explosion in adult education. Stephen Graubard[119] has suggested that our culture is entering into the century of the adult. Emerging is a multi-disciplinary phenomenon that has been propelled through advancements in developmental psychology, medicine, sociology, and education. Instead of the naive view that adulthood is a static state which is the goal of childhood development, thinkers increasingly understand adulthood to entail its own developmental processes. It is in the context of this changing understanding of adulthood and adult reli-gious education that my class, "Conversion in Retrospect" is a part.

Portrait of Today's Adult

I designed my class on conversion to be used by adult Presbyterians such as those who took part in the pilot class which I taught in the Spring of 1994. It would be impossible to take into account all learner characteristics in designing any class. For instance, one elderly participant in my class could neither see sufficiently to read the handouts nor hear the teacher or fellow students. This learner benefitted from the class's social aspects. However, he missed the exegetical information and other content. I, as the teacher, had neither foreseen nor planned for this particular student handicap. Thus, the class's effectiveness with one participant was, doubtless, minimized.

I did, however, anticipate several learner characteristics which I'll mention here. Obviously, what appears below is only a partial list of all the concerns and capacities which learners brought to the class. I mention these because the class's design accommodated to them.

Ecumenical Experience. Americans nowadays are less loyal to and defined by their church denomination. Robert Wuthnow[120] has laid out the sources of this softening of denominational influence. Church groups, he asserts, are less different sociologically than before World War II. It's harder to say what a typical Baptist or Episcopalian looks

like these days. Further, attendance at worship services of
a denomination other than one's own is more common. Most
significantly, according to Wuthnow, Americans switch
denominations more freely. The sociological factors con-
tributing to denomination switching are as follows: 1) The
experience of higher education which loosens traditional
loyalties and leaves people more likely to switch denomina-
tions once or even more times in a lifetime.   2)
Intermarriage across denomination lines, an increasingly
common practice, brings with it the likelihood of people
adopting a church affiliation other than their own. Finally,
Wuthnow identifies 3) increased interregional migration in
America as a factor which causes switching. Moving is
responsible for diversifying the religious landscape.
Catholics have moved south and built dozens of churches in
Atlanta. Southern Baptists aren't as "southern" as they were
decades ago.

In addition to shifts in the established denominational
structure, there are a variety of other religious influences
on contemporary American adults. These include the media
ministries, religious special interest groups, and the
amorphous influence of all that comes under the umbrella of
the "New Age" movement with its book stores, conferences, and
media exposure.

America's growing religious diversity was evident in my

class on conversion. It would be simplistic to call the class participants, "Presbyterians," though virtually all were members of Central Presbyterian Church. It would be more accurate to consider these class members, together with millions of American church attenders, as multi-doctrinal. Many were reared as Baptists or Catholics and became Presbyterians. We had several Baptist-Presbyterians, several Presbyterian-Presbyterians, some Non-affiliated-Presbyterians, and so on.

The denominational label, "Presbyterian" was less descriptive of the participants' thinking than it was of the setting where they were doing their thinking. Further, the denominational labels of participants' past experience, say, in childhood, served as touchstones to alternative viewpoints that were also part of each learner's journey. Some of these former beliefs exerted authority. "I was always taught that if you weren't born again you were damned." Some, learners had vigorously rejected. "Back home we used to sneak into revival meetings and laugh at the evangelist." Whatever the situation with any individual participant, the class presented an opportunity for him or her to sort out an array of views in his or her search for personal meaning around the concept of conversion.

Sophistication. Today's adult has wide exposure to

knowledge and ideas. Information flows into our lives <u>via</u> television, computer networks, library systems, and a growth in continuing education. Further, Americans increasingly participate in college education.

These factors are compounded by cross-cultural experiences. Not only are contemporary adults mobile within American society, they are often world travelers. Such exposure, in turn, reveals one's traditional values as culture-bound and not absolute. All of this works to decrease many adult's dependence on authority for religious truth. Leon McKenzie has said that "gullibility and naivete are absent in the adult population."[121]

This democratization of knowledge, in turn, sets up another dynamic among adults, namely the individualization of belief. Traditionally, truth was held by the group--be it tribe, family, or church. Since the Enlightenment, however, collective consciousness of truth has been ebbing away. Today, in the individualism of American culture, virtually every person desires to develop his or her own beliefs based on his or her own critical authority. The mediation of church or community has lost authority to hand down orthodoxy. More than ever before, church attenders work out for them-selves their own beliefs and convictions.

This sophistication was well-evident in my class on conversion. During the first class period, after the two

guests had shared their personal testimonies, several class members did not hesitate to announce aloud that they felt that conversion was "overblown." In a subsequent class session a class member reminded me that I had confused the Assyrians with the Babylonians in my lesson on Isaiah's call.

Obviously, the participants in my pilot class were not ready to accept anyone pontificating about conversion. Accordingly, the class design avoided such. By assigning responsibility to the group to develop and modify its own description of conversion, I avoided any gridlock with students over a definition which I might have proposed. This methodology, by the way, also conformed to our insights about definitions and conversion's complexity.

The course was set up to take advantage of student autonomy and sophistication. I intended the classroom climate to feel democratic within a structure which I established. This is not to say that the class rummaged around in every member's opinions. I, as the teacher, did function as an authority in the Bible study segment of the middle six classes. However, even when I was lecturing I made efforts to honor student input. I furnished as much supporting evidence for my conclusions as possible so that participants could retrace my exegetical steps and generate insights of their own. And this they did. On several oc-casions group members raised their own penetrating

observations about the text. In sum, the course design presupposed a sophistication where students were taking some responsibility for their own learning and beliefs.

Another place where I, the teacher, exercised considerable authority was in the class's basic structure. I decided that we would study conversion. It was my decision to use the Scriptures as authoritative source. The same is true with the decision to generate *conversion's* definition through group discussion. Taken together, these judgments very much determined the nature of our learning. I will say more about teacher authority when I discuss the "teacher" later in this chapter.

For the most part, however, this class not only anticipated, but was reliant upon, the critical intellectual energy of the group. Had there not been a variety of positions, or challenges, or some student suspicion of the teacher, then the class would have been quite dull. Indeed, much of it simply have not even happened, for the design made learners' critical abilities indispensable.

Other Learner Characteristics. Some of the learner characteristics which influenced the class design, I have already described in the first two chapters. The class assumed, for example, that the participants have some sort of encounter with God. Individual learners may not have been

aware of this encounter. Or they may not have been willing to speak about it. But the class proceeded in the assumption that God's activity has and continues to be present.

Further, the class anticipated that the learners may experience the variety of difficulties attendant to talking about conversion. We've detailed these in the first two chapters. The class design took this difficulty into account. First, I set up the class so even someone who knew nothing about conversion would be able to participate. I did this by scheduling the guests for the first class. The outsiders provided examples of conversion for those who were totally unfamiliar with the experience. Second, I, as the teacher, welcomed any opinion concerning conversion and any level of ability to speak about it. Throughout the sessions I worked to accept all convictions and the validity of all experiences. My aim was to minimize threat or embarrassment for anyone having difficulty sharing.

One student revealed to me in a private conversation between sessions that she had experienced a transforming spiritual encounter years ago. The experience was so impor-tant for this woman that she remembers and draws strength from it each day. Her experience, however, was also so private that she felt unable to share it in class. She went on to tell me that with many more hours of the class she might have been able to open up and share. I interpret this

remark to mean that she experienced the class as nurturing of sharing. In this case, however, the nurture was not quite sufficient.

Most of the pilot class participants seemed to have little trouble speaking freely out of their personal experiences. However, should anyone conduct this class in a church setting where participants were reluctant to share the tender details of their personal spiritual lives, the design, I believe, would foster openness.

Adult Development. My class's design factored not only sociological or external influences which shape adult parti-cipants, but also internal or developmental transitions which challenge and shape adults. Since the 1970's adulthood transitions and the journey through one's middle years has been an area of considerable intellectual ferment. One signpost of this was the mass popularity of Gail Sheehy's book, Passages.[122] Since that time, the view which held adulthood to be a static state, stretching between adolescence and old age, has given way to the view which sees life's broad middle as a dynamic journey filled with its own crises, stages, goals, and transitions.

It is important to understand that several developmental theories exist. Each views the journey through the middle of life from a different perspective. John Elias has classified

theories into four general categories.[123] These, briefly, are as follows:

1.) The Psychoanalytic Theories: Including Freud, Jung, Erikson, and Becker, this group focuses on "powerful forces in the depths of a person's being"[124] as resources for growth and maturity.

2.) The Behavioristic Theories: These are typically beholden to B. F. Skinner's work and concentrate attention on the influence of social context in fostering maturity. C. Ellis Nelson's understanding of the formative power of congregations falls into this category.

3.) The Cognitive Developmental Theories: Informed by Piaget's work, these theories include the work of Kohlberg, Fowler, and Peatling. They emphasize people's developing cognitive functions, as opposed to emotion or environment, in their concept of maturity or the stages of maturity.

4.) The Existential or Humanistic Theories: Gathered under this eclectic category are the names of Rogers, Maslow, Allport, Knowles, and Kidd. These theorists have attempted to integrate various developmental emphases with a deeply optimistic view of humanity. These views in turn resonate with self-help movements and the general view that people are masters of their own fate.

I mention the multiplicity of adult developmental theories to make clear that no one theory interprets the

immense complexity of human development. Moreover, various understandings of adult development constitute a relatively new and fluid field of study. So at the same time that these theories open windows on the adult journey, they also raise questions and critique. In defining maturity, for example, do these theories subvert the very idea of continual development? By suggesting stages, do theories subtly assign greater rank to those who are construed as of higher maturity? These are both frequently asked questions.

Given the immaturity of this field which lacks consensus and wrestles with penetrating critiques, it is important to clarify precisely how these theories inform our work and how they don't. I do this because the various theories--and I'm thinking of James Fowler's stages of faith[125] in particular-- are, frankly, fascinating. Their potential to suggest structure and orderliness to the heretofore amorphous idea of personal maturity is compelling. They also suggest schemes-- which we will not use--through which to understand or evaluate this project's work. So, before we turn to how insight on adult development informs us, we need to clarify what it does not do.

First, we are not interpreting conversion as a form of stage development. James Fowler, himself, provides guidance on the interpretation of conversion within his system.[126] He distinguishes between the "structure" of human development,

which entails his sequence of stages, and the "content" of faith which is a system of stories and conviction. The latter constitutes particular traditions of faith, say Judaism. Structure and content, Fowler asserts, parallel and interrelate with each other but are different. Conversion pertains to the content of faith. A conversion experience is a person's sudden transforming appropriation of stories and convictions of a faith tradition.

This insight argues against any simple equation of stage change and conversion. Conversion can occur at any stage. It may or may not be accompanied by stage change.[127]

Second, my class's educational goals are not explicitly to nudge participants up the faith stages. In other words, I am not measuring success in the terminology of adult psychosocial development. Whether or not class participants move towards, say, greater individuation or less dependence on conventional organizational authority is incidental.

With the complexity and diversity of adult development in mind, it is fitting to identify one scheme through which I was informed about the adults in my class. I chose Fowler's because it is well-documented and deals specifically with religious issues. I find it helpful to remember, for example, that many adult church members are stage three, Synthetic-Conventional types. This stage's principle characteristic has to do with the importance of affiliation

in the shaping of one's outlook. For people with this less-differentiated structure of relating to life's ultimate meaning, the silence of conversion talk in Presbyterian churches might in itself make the subject suspect. Indeed, during the phone interviews which I conducted long after the end of the course, one woman told me that conversion was never much in her thoughts because she and her husband always socialized with fellow Presbyterians.

What Fowler's stages of faith do for this project is to remind us that developmental struggles are present in the classroom. Whether or not the adult participants can discuss or are even aware of their inner quests, they are engaged in their own dramas. Some may be venturing away from conformity to the expectations and judgments of family, church, or culture. Others may be restless with the Christian faith that has, until recently, sustained them. Still others may be troubled by their own inner voices summoning them to focus on neglected yearnings.

Daniel Aleshire has elegantly incorporated the spirit of the new insights on adult development in his discussion of adult education.[128] He observes that the biblical first humans, Adam and Eve, struggled with work, relationships, and gender roles. These three great topics continue to define the general areas where adults feel challenged today. The Christian educator of adults, for example, can be sure that

his or her learners are grappling with the task of finding work's proper place in life. For some, work has grown into a dark device to accumulate power and prestige. Others may never have found an appropriate vocation. The same kinds of challenges arise in the other two areas--relationships and gender roles.

Without encumbering his work with developmental jargon, Aleshire imparts a sense that the adult journey is a quest. The educator's first response to this journey, according to Aleshire is simply to "pay attention."

> Adulthood incorporates so much time, so many experiences, and so much individual reflection that the hue and texture of faith can be woven into many different designs and fabrics, The characterizations made by Fowler, Sparkman, and Moran are both insightful and helpful. These three people are cartographers; they have mapped the territory of adult faith experience. Their descriptions of faith are appropriately used as a way of paying attention to the people at church. That phrase, no doubt growing old by now, nevertheless continues to be an important one. Understanding different faith expressions helps identify the issues and tensions with which adults deal. And understanding those issues provides insight for the task of understanding who adults are.[129]

Adult developmental theories, particular Fowler's, inform this project not in the sense of establishing goals or a means of measuring the class's success. Rather, they provide a window through which we can notice and respect the participants. Awareness of faith development enables the

instructor (and maybe the participants also) to appreciate the learners and to honor their inner work. The developmentalists' insights contribute to the class's tone. They remind us that to speak of conversion, with its divers facets, is to step onto the holy ground of personal transformation which the participants are already exploring.

The developmental outlook also invites patient tolerance for class participants who may experience the class as subversive of cherished notions of the second birth. While I did not encounter such resistance in the pilot class, it is likely that subsequent classes will include participants who are firmly committed to a stereotyped view of conversion and not ready to reflect critically on it. Fowler's stages suggest that such loyalty to the traditional possesses its own genius. It is part of a profound inner drama.

The middle aged male guest who presented his "testimony" in the first class told me that most conversions take place in adolescence. He went on to explain that once people become established in adulthood, they are too staid to respond to the evangelistic summons.

I didn't challenge this, but noted the irony that he himself was middle-aged when his transforming experience took place. Further, the Bible characters in our study were all adults.

The developmental outlook which we've been discussing

challenges the mentality which subtly discounts the adult experience or neglects its dynamism. That middle life is a promising time for even conversional transformation was suggested by Seward Hiltner who took his cue from comments made by Carl Jung.

> Without necessarily underwriting every detail of Jung's reasoning, I think he is brilliantly right on the main point. The age when conversion means life or death--the eleventh hour, in biblical language--is the entrance to the middle years. Before that, one's value system is probably suffi- ciently affected by the general culture that he [or she] is mostly not in jail, not a traitor to his [or her] country, not a Don Juan or a lush; and, for a time, those negative virtues may be sufficient when allied with their positive counterparts. For the long pull, however, they are not enough. At this point the "depths" (either in Jung's sense or some other) must, whether one knows it or not, either be faced or, by some cultural legerdemain, avoided.[130]

In conclusion, Fowler's stage theory informs the teach- er's attitude toward his or her adult participants. It contributes to a climate of expectancy and receptivity. Knowing that each individual is in the midst of a quest of deep significance, the teacher moves through the teaching task mindful that what he or she is dealing with, matters.

In the final analysis, my class was not about getting *conversion's* definition right. It was not about establishing arid exegetical fine points. It was about supporting, encouraging, and guiding each individual's ongoing growth.

The class endeavored to be a supportive context in which conversion could enter or re-enter the transforming process; where old habits of thought could thaw; where conversion could be introduced again, and our acquaintance with it deepened and enriched.

VI. THE CONTEXT

It is a general educational principle that the class's setting determines, to some extent, the class's design and the kind of learning which can take place. I've noticed as I've visited sick parishioners that hospitals have become educational institutions. In addition to various medical procedures and therapies, hospitals now provide learning opportunities for patients. Pre-surgical patients can tune their in-room televisions to video demonstrations of their scheduled surgical procedure. Hospitals sponsor classes on everything from childbirth to bandage replacement.

Clearly, the hospital context makes certain kinds of learning possible. The collection of televisions, all interconnected to a central video distribution center, is a powerful resource. Nurses, doctors, and fellow patients who are present in the hospital enhance medical learning by expertly answering questions or sharing experiences.

I wish to show in this section that Presbyterian con-gregations are similarly rich contexts for adult learning

about religious conversion. Ironically, popular wisdom suggests that conversion is best encountered and discussed outside the Church. The revivalist's tent pitched in an open field for a week of evening services has become a standard setting to house the conversion experience. If the tent is not used then conversion is at least administered by the traveling evangelist who uses a local church building for convenience. Despite the building, the presence of an outsider carries the suggestion that the proper sphere of conversion is in the unusual gathering.

The same message obtains when teens come home from the evangelical summer camp reporting a second birth experience. College freshmen often encounter their call to conversion in the campus fellowship group which derives much of its identity in its separateness from the campus church.

In my pilot class, both of the two guests experienced conversion in contexts outside of the traditional Church. I, myself, trace my conversion experience to a beach evangelism effort. Several participants reported conversions in non-church settings.

The reasons for conversion's seeming absence from the congregation, and I'm thinking especially of Presbyterian congregations, are complex. Some of them we've expounded in previous chapters. Some of them even make sense. Those, for example, who think of conversion as the doorway into the

Christian life, are naturally going to venture outside the church to reach the unchurched.

A core concern of this entire project is that, for Presbyterians, conversion is too much outside--even locked out. And when we acquiesce to the notion that conversion belongs outside then we also lose its vitalizing effects inside the fellowship. Put positively, when we bring conversion within the congregational sphere we also bring in the call to and recollection of one of God's most moving, renewing works among God's people. So, contrary to the pop theology which locates talk of conversion outside many churches, I contend that a Presbyterian congregation is a conducive environment to talk about and reflect on conversion. Indeed, the congregational context is indispensable to the project I've developed. It affords resources for the class's work unavailable outside. The following sections will list these and identify their contribution to the class design.

Dialogue

The most important resource afforded by this class's congregational setting is dialogue among participants and between participants and teacher. The ninety minute design assigns sixty minutes to such interchange, which is to say, it is indispensable.

Dialogue brings into the learning process the reservoir of class members' experiences. Unlike children and youth, adults bring a wide range of individual differences which make the adult classroom more heterogeneous.

Among the most important experiences for this class are the students' encounters with God. When these can be remembered and shared aloud, they open other participants to a fresh encounter with God. Dialogue overcomes the spiritual isolation of individual Presbyterians who have had rich spiritual experiences, but who don't realize that such are commonplace among fellow congregants.

Dialogue also sharpens one's ideas by exposing rigid attitudes to critique. Thinking matures when it is shared. It also undergoes modification and enlargement when challenged by alternative ideas.

I can think of few other settings where learning about religious conversion benefits from such lively and non-anxious verbal exchange. Even preaching about conversion or discussing it in personal pastoral conversations does not benefit from the range of experiences expressed in group dialogue.

Adults have fewer opportunities to talk about conversion outside the congregation. I recall, as a high school student, attending a Sunday School gathering sponsored by a huge Baptist Church. After the evangelist-preacher spoke to

the crowd, he invited the "unsaved" in the group to approach the podium. At that moment an usher was at my elbow attempting to ease me out of my seat and down the aisle for a new birth experience. I resisted, asking if "salvation" could only be secured by the prescribed behaviors. Obviously, I did not get dialogue and a liberating exchange of ideas in that situation.

To be perfectly accurate, that particular experience did take place in a congregational setting. It wasn't, however, conversational. I had no opportunity to hear the variety of transforming experiences that were likely to be present in the lives of the worshippers around me. For me on that day, conversion felt manipulative and foreign. I drove home from the experience both drawn to the Gospel which I detected in that setting, but also defensive about the rigid manner prescribed for reacting to that Gospel.

My class aimed at a different kind of learning by incorporating leisurely conversation about the topic. Hearing one another, we soon discovered that God's awakening to conversion touched many of us in a variety of ways. It happened at different points in the life cycle and produced different results. This kind of learning could only happen within the Church where dialogue is encouraged.

Theological Continuity

By conducting a class on conversion in a context which itself is shaped by the Reformed tradition, we were able to do several things not possible outside the church or in a theologically neutral setting.

For one, our assumptions about scriptural authority and the techniques we used to study the texts were typical for Presbyterian Churches. Some of our exegetical approaches included insights from narrative, form, and other types of biblical criticism. Further, we regarded with equal respect texts from both testaments. The project was not influenced by a quiet dispensationalism or Marcionism which assigned greater authority to one or another portion of the Scriptures. When we opened the Bible and studied it, we were adhering to familiar practice for this and most Presbyterian churches.

A second benefit of conducting this class in a Presbyterian Church was the absence of evangelistic urgency. We didn't do our work in the shadow of an official position which holds that a demonstrable conversion experience is necessary for entrance into God's grace and the believing fellowship. As we've shown, conversion in Reformed reckoning is a fruit of God's sanctifying grace. Located on the sanctification side of the justification-sanctification duality, conversion is one among many ways that God's transforming grace touches people. This scheme, in turn, lets us

move beyond the pattern of conversion as the one-time drama-
tic, indispensable, threshold experience. Once free of this
stereotype, we can find the leisure to exchange views and
accept all experiences. Finally, exploring conversion in a
Presbyterian fellowship provides a supportive setting for
participants to integrate new discoveries with traditional
convictions. In the pilot class, for example, members
brought up the topic of predestination. Because both teacher
and students were committed to the theology which
incorporates this conception, we were able to respond in
helpful and challenging ways.

Convenience

Some students who attended the pilot class had little
interest in conversion. Others hadn't given much thought to
conversion for years. These learners attended the class
simply because they habitually participate in the congrega-
tion's activities. For them, the class re-introduced an area
of Christian experience which they might never have explored
on their own outside the congregation.

The Presence of God

The final and most consequential benefit of the class's
congregational setting was the presence of God. We took for
granted God's working among us as we gathered and studied.

The classes opened with prayer. This consciously acknowledged God's presence. We studied the Scriptures in reliance on the Holy Spirit's inspiration. Finally, we shared from our personal experiences with God, confident that in remembering God's past acts, we would again encounter the author of those events.

VII. THE TEACHER

Teachers Other than Myself

The design of my class on "Conversion in Retrospect" allows for the leadership of teachers other than myself. While they need not retrace my odyssey of learning about conversion, it is important that they possess some skills and convictions. The most important of these are the following:

Commitment to the Class's Goal. This class's central thrust is for all participants to attend to the nature of God's converting activity in the Scriptures, history, and our lives. This exercise of attending is designed to be an occasion when participants can also deepen their appreciation of their own experiences. Any teacher agenda to move students towards or away from certain kinds of conversions disrupts the students' appreciation of what has already happened in their lives. It would be a fatal

misunderstanding for a teacher to use this class as a device to prompt conversions. Equally problematic, would be a teacher who attempted to use the class to depreciate conversions or those who would foster them.

Familiarity With Conversion. The teacher of this class needs a strong feel for the range of experience which has come to be called "conversion" throughout Church History. Reading Kerr and Mulder's book, Conversions, together with Walter Conn's anthology, Conversion, would accomplish this. The former volume impresses upon the reader how individual and situation-specific conversions are. The latter gathers up the many facets involved in the concept. As the teacher of the pilot class, I discovered a similar variety of conversion stories shared by the participants.

Expertise in Biblical Exegesis. I found, as I worked with the six texts used in the pilot class, that the richest insights pertaining to conversion were often revealed by sophisticated exegetical approaches. For example, I discovered that the words "follow me" in Mark's first chapter are carefully located in the midst of a chiastic text structure. This observation was important for understanding the Markan view of what enables discipleship. The teacher of this and similar material needs to be skilled in ferreting

out such insights. Moreover, he or she needs to be comfortable conveying such insight to a lay learner group.

There is no reason why the six texts which I chose could not be replaced by others which deal with God's transformation of people. Stories like the calls of Abraham, Gideon, or Jeremiah in the Old Testament, and the texts on Bartimaeus, the Rich Young Ruler, the Ethiopian Eunuch, or the call of Peter in the New Testament are all promising. Whatever texts are chosen, strong exegetical skills are important for the class leader.

Group Facilitation Skills. This part of the teaching, when class members compare their working definition of *conversion* with new exegetical insight and then share their own experiences, is conceived as a way for the group to investigate together how conversion is meaningful for them. "Knowledge" in this segment, "is constructed by persons in interaction with one another."[131] Though the agenda and content of the learning is unforeseen, the teacher's role in this segment is not passive. He or she, sets a tone and, like a game referee, keeps the activity orderly. This is achieved by the teacher's ability to hear, accept, and appreciate each student's contribution. Sometimes teacher questions which probe for more student disclosure are helpful. Sometimes teacher silence allows a student's

sharing to linger in the room and gather a sense of significance.

Because the class plan designates no less than one hour for group interaction, the teacher must possess group discussion leadership skills. Such skill will inform the way the teacher sets up the classroom, recruits participants, and presides over the discussion.

The facilitator needs to bear in mind that conversion is a difficult topic to discuss in Presbyterian churches. A learning climate which accepts and relaxes students is advantageous. Further, because the class aims to support students as they remember, reevaluate, and reveal their own religious experiences, the teacher needs to preside with the thought that this process is immensely significant. This is because it is in this final phase of the group interaction that we expect God's Spirit to be freshly active in our midst.

One student, commenting several weeks after the class series was finished, told me that it was important for the class to linger over each student's personal sharing. She felt that when a person makes him or herself vulnerable in sharing the details of a transforming religious encounter, for the class to jump immediately to the next comment trivializes the moment's sacredness.

VIII. CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have shown that the design of "Conversion in Retrospect" is a function of what we know about the students, what is possible in the setting, and what is known and believed by the teacher.

The students are adult Presbyterians. We know that such bring to class a rich accumulation of experiences, religious and otherwise. Research into the adult journey teaches us that adults are in the midst of their own struggles to grow and mature. By design, the class meets its students in the midst of this journey. It then attempts to assist them in sorting out and deepening their understanding of conversion, a topic of intrinsic interest to evolving Christians. The class gives them a vocabulary with which to speak of religious experience. Then it invites them to consider conversion's meaning--past and present--in their own lives.

The setting is the Presbyterian congregation. It provides a matrix of relationships, time, and dialogue--factors often unavailable outside the parish--in which to explore conversion. The congregation is also a setting with ideals and a distinct theological outlook. These constitute an intellectual framework which ratifies the class's use of the Scriptures as authority, the acceptance of all religious experience as valid, and the assumption that God will be present and transforming in the group's work.

The teacher is a Presbyterian minister. This individual holds views and ideals similar to those which I reached as a result of my own study of conversion. These include awareness of conversion's complexity and dynamism in Bible and history. They include a grasp on the theology which locates conversion as part of God's work to transform a person rather than qualifying him or her for God's acceptance. Finally, the teacher needs to know how to enable the students to share convictions and experiences in their own process of finding deeper understanding.

Together, these resources make possible the class which I will, in the next chapter, describe in detail.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CLASS: "CONVERSION IN RETROSPECT

So far, I have attempted to diagnose a problem or need that Presbyterians have with religious conversion. I have suggested that this need can be addressed in a certain kind of adult class--more accurately a *course*--within the context of a Presbyterian congregation. In this chapter, I will report my actual experience teaching such a course. In the final chapter I will offer evaluation of this class and teaching experience.

It needs to be said that educational evaluation has multiple facets.[132] For example, the first four chapters of this report are evaluative with respect to student needs. I've attempted to identify the difficulties and negative feelings which Presbyterians have with conversion. This is a form of evaluation.

In this chapter we will--among other things--be evaluative with respect to individual class objectives. These objectives were part of the lesson plans which I developed for each class. These called for specific student activities and learning. I also scheduled the ninety minute class time to include various activities. In this chapter, I will

describe what actually happened with the students and the agenda. Then, I will determine how well this matched what we were attempting to do.

In the final chapter I will evaluate my teaching and the overall course outcomes.[133] I use the word *outcomes* rather than *goals* because a class experience--especially one which deals with a rich subject and lively adults--is always bound to produce learning other than that aimed for in the goals. Certainly the goals will be assessed in the final chapter. And so will unforeseen happenings and surprises.

I. THE COURSE'S GOALS

For the purpose of conducting an actual series of classes whose aims are specific enough to be evaluated, I used four goals as follows.

The course, "Conversion in Retrospect" intends:

1. For class members to acquire a vocabulary and sense of confidence with which to become conversant about conversion and religious experience in general.

2. For class members to be extending, correcting, and enriching their own understanding of conversion and religious life-reorienting experiences.

3. For class members to remember and re-evaluate their own religious experiences in light of new information arising from the class's Scripture study, group discussion, and their

own independent homework reading.

4.   For class members to experience God's presence and transformation in the class gathering.

II.   PLANS AND ARRANGEMENTS

Lesson Plans

In advance of the class, I formulated and wrote up lesson plans for each of the course's eight class sessions. In their original form, I structured these lesson plans according to the following outline:

1.   Goals
2.   Objectives
3.   Theory or Exegesis Which Informs this Class
4.   Step-by-Step Description of the Teaching and Learning Process
5.   Evaluation
6.   Bibliography

To avoid repetition in this report, I will present each session's lesson plan without repeating the course goals which I have already identified. Neither will I repeat in each lesson plan a description of the evaluative procedure which I used during and following the final class session. I designed the final evaluation to assess not only the explicit goals but all of the happenings in the class, including the quality of my teaching. I describe this over-all evaluative process in my discussion of the last class. Finally, for this report, bibliographic information will appear in the

chapter's endnotes. These changes allow me to present here shortened versions of the plans. These will follow this format:

1. Objectives
2. Theory or Exegesis Which Informs this Class
3. Step-by-Step Description of the Teaching and Learning Process
4. Evaluation of Class Objectives

The final element in the lesson plan calls for evaluation of each session's success at reaching its specific objectives. I did this informally by viewing a videotape of each session, talking with class members, and consulting with my Doctor of Ministry advisor. This interim assessment made possible the fine-tuning of each class in advance.

Biblical Texts

My choice of the six biblical texts for study requires some explanation. The Bible itself doesn't identify these episodes as conversions. Many Christians, however, have assumed that they are--particularly those selections in the New Testament. I included Old Testament texts to get at least arguable coverage of the whole Bible. I chose these six particular texts on the basis of my familiarity with them. The Markan call of the fishers and the texts in Acts figured prominently in my preparatory studies on conversion and the New Testament. So, I felt particularly interested in

and equipped to present exegesis on these.

Dates, Times, and Class Duration

I conducted the pilot course at Central Presbyterian Church in Dayton, Ohio on Sunday mornings between April 10, 1994 and May 29, 1994 inclusive. Each class required 90 minutes, from 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m., and was held during the Christian Education "hour" just prior to the congregation's 10:45 a.m. service of worship.

I have discussed the importance of context for learning about conversion. Thus, my choice of site required no deliberation.

My decision to conduct the class on Sunday mornings was driven by my concern that a weekday evening class would, due to hectic schedules, fail to draw the desired number of students. The evening time slot, however, had two clear advantages over Sunday mornings. Evenings would be less hectic for teacher and participants. And all involved might feel more wakeful at an evening session. Nevertheless, I chose Sunday mornings on the basis of my un-proven hunch that this was the most promising time to gather a full class.

In the early stages of my lesson plan development, I designed the classes for 75 minutes. The 90 minute session length was longer than is customary for adult classes at Central.

I changed my mind and adopted a 90 minute class after asking potential participants if they would agree to come early. They made it clear that this would not be difficult for them.

I also ran an informal pilot class. This took place in the course of a weekday adult Bible study which was scheduled to study the Nicodemus story in John. I used this class period to conduct a version of my class, "Conversion In Retrospect." The participants of that single class were enthusiastic and engaged in the learning techniques which I'd designed. But they did not move quickly enough for a 75 minute class. Thus, the class became 90 minutes in order to cycle adequately through the exegesis, work on *conversion's* definition, and personal sharing.

Publicity and Recruitment

As with the decisions on date, time, and class duration, I determined the number of participants using a mixture of factors. From an educational standpoint, conversational intimacy is required for the group interaction portion of the class. This would suggest an enrollment of 12 to 15. Other factors, however, significantly expanded this number. I was teaching a Sunday morning class of about eight participants prior to conducting the class on conversion. My plan was to suspend this class and let participants all go into "Con-

version in Retrospect." The lay teachers of a second adult class, plus most of their members, also wished to participate in my class. As with my class, we took in the entire second group. Finally, I felt honor-bound to open the class to at least some in the congregation-at-large. This was driven by my desire to include as many as possible of those who had supported my preparation of the course and my Doctor of Ministry studies in general.

The enrollment was also determined by space available The largest "small" room available--without going to the sanctuary or multi-purpose room--held 24 comfortably. This became the target class size.

After I enlisted the whole of two existing adult education classes, I filled remaining places by circulating for several weeks the following announcement in Central Church's worship bulletin:

> **Conversion in Retrospect, April 10 - May 29, 9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m.:** Reverend DeCelle's Doctor of Ministry project on personal conversion is open to 24 Central Church members. This class will provide members with the opportunity to explore what the Bible says about conversion -- sometimes called personal "salvation" or the "born again experience." We will also have ample time to remember and share personal experiences. The class will study six Bible passages which describe the "conversions" or transforming experiences of biblical characters. We will listen to others talk about their own unique experiences. During the final class, we will discuss if and how the experience has been helpful or meaningful.

As an option, class members will be able to study conversions of famous Christians throughout history by using Kerr and Mulder's book, Conversions.

Because the class entails considerable interaction between members, it is limited to 24. Class members must be willing to begin their work 1/2 hour earlier than the regular 9:30 a.m. Sunday School hour. Choir members, who must depart for choir rehearsal at 10:15 a.m., are welcome. A sign-up sheet is available.

The sign-up sheet was headed by the same words.

Guests

The lesson plan for the first class called for two guests from outside the congregation who would share their own conversion stories with the class. The middle aged woman, Pat, was an acquaintance of mine who had agreed months before to help me in any way with my work on conversion. I phoned her several weeks before the first class. After I thoroughly explained the class's nature and purpose, she readily agreed to participate.

Because Pat was a member of a Christian Missionary Alliance congregation and her conversion intertwined with health problems related to pregnancy, I wanted to balance her presentation with that of a man, preferably a Presbyterian. Beyond my parish, I knew of no local non-clergy Presbyterians who were converts. As I mentioned in the first chapter, I called another Presbyterian minister who also was unable to

identify a parishioner who might be able to make the kind of presentation I was seeking. I finally resolved the problem by asking one of my own members, a participant in the "Walk to Emmaus" movement, to suggest names. He provided three possibilities, the first of whom--Al--agreed to participate. As with Pat, I spoke with Al for about 45 minutes on the phone. In a leisurely and thorough way I explained the class and its aims. He readily agreed to participate. I followed both phone calls with a letter of confirmation.

Classroom Factors

I elected to hold the class in Central Church's lounge. This is a pleasant, carpeted, softly lit room of 40 feet by 28 feet. The lounge features a fireplace, extensive windows, and is centrally located serving as a natural corridor for first floor foot traffic.

Mindful that each class entailed both a presentation by the teacher and group interaction, I arranged movable chairs and existing upholstered furniture in a crescent-shaped pattern. This allowed each learner easy viewing of both the teacher and follow participants. I did not vary this arrangement throughout the course.

III. THE FIRST CLASS: "TALKING ABOUT CONVERSION"

The Lesson Plan

Objectives. The first class will contribute to achieving the overall course goals by seeking to accomplish the following:

1.   Class members will listen to the teacher explain the course's nature and structure and become familiar with the course's general direction.

2.   Class members will listen to and interact with two guests who will share their personal stories of conversion.

3.   Class members will think about conversions and transforming religious experiences and will begin talking about this topic by naming aloud several elements entailed in religious conversion.

Theory Which Informs This Class Session. Simple as this class session may seem, it is supported by a complex theoretical foundation. The approach of having class members assemble an open-ended, multi-faceted definition of *conversion* based on their own use of the concept in everyday discourse reflects Ludwig Wittgenstein's insights about the way words and language work. This theoretical background is treated thoroughly in Chapter Two.

A second assumption which guides the conduct of this class grows out of the awareness that the word *conversion*--that is, its Greek or Hebrew equivalent--is not commonplace

in the Scriptures. None of this is to suggest that "conver-sion" is a non-biblical concept. Rather, it suggests that studying conversion in the Scriptures is made complex by the scarcity of key words. Again, a full discussion of conversion in the Bible also appears in Chapter Two.

It is from the insights that an objective definition of *conversion* cannot be given on one hand and that the Scriptures themselves do not very much describe conversion under that term, that the first class begins with the conversion experiences of the class members and guests. What, in other words, do we mean when we use this concept?

Finally, this and all of the class sessions assume when congregations gather to remember and retell stories of God's activity, that this sharing itself is a fresh occasion to encounter God.

Step-by-Step Description of the Teaching and Learning Process.

1.Welcome and Introduction   15 minutes

During this opening segment, the teacher will welcome and insure that students know each other's names. The teacher will then pass out copies of the class schedule, hour and place of each meeting, and a list of the Bible texts or topic of each class. With this, the teacher will briefly explain the class's two aims--to make conversion a familiar,

discussable part of Christian discipleship and, in the process, to put the class in a position to encounter God's transforming presence.

2.   Listening to Two Conversion Stories   30 minutes   The c

own conversion stories.

3.   Establishing a Group Definition of Conversion

30 minutes

Having, through the guests' stories, brought to students' minds the idea of conversion, the teacher invites the class to name aloud various facets which belong to the experience of conversion. Class members are likely to name such aspects as contrition over sin, changing religion, indescribable religious feelings, and so on. The teacher will record each idea on news print for future use.

4.Closing Comments or Questions   15 minutes

The teacher will invite students to share additional remarks or ask any questions which they would like to add to the discussion. This will give class members another opportunity to get oriented on the class's nature and aims. Further, this will accustom class members to the hospitality with which their input will be received. During this time, members may wish to share something of their own religious experience. The teacher will actively encourage this kind of sharing in subsequent classes.

Evaluation. Following each session, the teacher will reflect on the happenings of that class and determine the degree to which its objectives were achieved. This can be done *via* memory, by viewing the video tape, and by discussing the experience with participants. This weekly assessment will serve as the basis of any lesson plan adjustment in subsequent weeks.

The First Class Session: April 10, 1994

Description of the Teaching and Learning Process. The class gathered in advance of the designated starting hour--9:00 a.m. The participants' mood was light and laughter punctuated their conversation. I launched the session by thanking the group for participating and I offered a prayer that God will use our work together as a transforming experience.

I used about thirteen minutes to distribute the class schedule and Bible study texts. I explained the video camera's purpose and invited homework reading in the Bible and Conversions. I then told Gladys' story--an unplanned event--as a device to explain to the students the course's goals.

This accomplished, I introduced Pat, our first guest. Pat had carefully organized a presentation of her story and used written notes. She traced her pilgrimage through a

difficult childhood and nominal participation in the Roman Catholic Church and later non-affiliation. Pat located her conversion in the context of a lengthy hospital stay associated with a high risk pregnancy. Secluded in the hospital and under the stress of her medical situation, Pat was visited daily by a friend, Kim, who shared her witness to Christian faith. For Pat, the crucial component in Kim's witness was the element of grace which overcame Pat's sense of God's distance or disinterest. Pat's moment of conversion was when she "asked Jesus to come into [her] life."

Crucial to Pat's understanding of her conversion were three experiences which immediately followed her "accepting Christ." These included her uncharacteristic serenity in the face of surgery, a vivid dream in which Pat met and resisted a demonic force, and the unexplainable--"miraculous"--cessation of her pregnancy problems.

Following Pat's conversion, she studied the Scriptures, listened to Christian radio, and, after a period of five years, joined a church.

Al, our second guest, reported a conversion experience in his late forties in the course of his participation in a "Walk to Emmaus" weekend. Before this, Al was affiliated with a large Methodist Church. There he was active, but often distressed with, the organizational problems in that congregation. A striking feature of Al's story was the

essential role that churches or organizations played in mediating to him his personal spiritual state. Al complained of the fact that when he was in the Methodist Church, he wasn't "challenged." On the Walk to Emmaus, on the other hand, he was. Al's conversion, in his recounting, took place as a result of his finding the right program.

At one point during the weekend, Al reported being overcome with emotion and sobbing profusely. In this state, he was guided to kneel at the front of a church and "accept Christ."

Following this experience, Al said that he joined a small independent congregation located several miles out of town. Al's moral sensibilities had also deeply changed. He tithes and has ceased his social drinking. Al also now sees homosexuality and abortion as "abominations to the Lord." Al further shared that his new perspective gives him a "deep sense of peace," because, to use his words, "when I sin I can go to Christ for forgiveness." Further, "I'm ready to die. I've made my peace with the Lord. I'm ready to die and live with God eternally. The conversion experience prepares you for death."

Pat's and Al's presentations took precisely one hour, evoked several clarifying questions from the learners, and obviously engaged those present.[134]

In the final twenty minutes, class members--together

with the guests--worked to name aloud facets of conversion. I, the teacher, captured these on news print. We generated the following list:

-complete surrender of will
-recognizing brokenness
-turmoil-to-inner-peace
-a life-changing experience
-a sequence of events
-leaves "bad taste"
-re-affirmation of faith
-accepting the gift of grace
-all things old become new
-commitment
-continuing   re-affirmation of   faith
-series   of   little conversions
-overblown
-faith given without change
     (for some)
-a wake-up call
-new awareness of God's pre-
vious presence
-connected with the size of the "hole in your heart"
-one-on-one   relationship with Jesus
-need is prerequisite
-head knowledge to heart
     knowledge
-becoming aware of "hole in
     heart"
-associated with "religious
     nut"
-different for everybody
-God's choice to "hit ya"
-possible conflict with pre-
     destination
-different than slow growth

During this discussion, class members were comfortable taking dissenting positions. Several members didn't hesitate to question the necessity of conversion or the need to view it in stereotyped ways. Consequently, several participants used much of the group conversation time to wrestle aloud with their hesitations and skepticism about religious conversion.

The first class ended with a tentative undefined group idea of conversion which entailed sweeping personal change, a sense of fulfillment where emptiness was, and some uncertainty whether conversion must take certain forms or whether

it was necessary at all. Noticeably missing at this point on the learners' list of facets was any element of contrition over sin, religious experience, the entrance into community, a call to vocation, or new moral sensibility.

Evaluation. As the class went to work for the first time, it demonstrated several competencies. No awkwardness or embarrassment was evident. The group worked as a unit in speaking and listening to one another. As discussion developed, one idea often triggered others around the room. Each contributor to the discussion offered his or her suggestion with some explanation and amplification. Clearly, the work of acquiring skills with which to discuss religious experience was well under way.

Further, the class proceeded generally according to the lesson plan, although the guests' presentations consumed a whole hour, twice the allotted time. On reflection, this seemed to be a worthy substitute for those final minutes of general conversation which were lost.

As to the objectives: The students' listening and interaction with the guests was clearly warm and engaging. Further, the group displayed no reluctance to plunge into the topic. If any difficulties in discussing conversion were present, they were not evident at this point. Of course, more personal sharing of religious experience will be invited

in later classes.

My final assessment of the first class was that we met our objectives and were ready to move as planned into the second session.

VI. THE SECOND CLASS: "THE FISHERS' CALL"

<u>The Lesson Plan</u>

<u>Objectives</u>. The second class will contribute to achieving the overall course goals by seeking to accomplish the following:

1. Class members will follow the teacher's exegesis of the designated biblical text. They will interact with the teacher by asking and answering questions which clarify the line of argument in the presentation.

2. Class members will use this newly acquired exegetical information to confirm, extend, modify, enrich, or negate their list of conversion's facets.

3. Class members will be invited to remember personal experiences which compare with or approximate the new understandings of conversion that have arisen in the discussion. Some class members will feel free to describe these experiences aloud. Those not speaking will listen to and interact with those who are.

Exegetical Work. The exegesis of Mark 1.14-20 (see Appendix 2), emphasizes the fishers' abandonment of work, security, relationships, and home in order to respond to Jesus' invitation to discipleship.

Step-by-Step Description of the Teaching and Learning Process.

1.Summary of the First Class   5 minutes

The teacher will launch this class by reviewing the content of the first class session. This will permit any newcomers to participate as if they had been present during the first session.

2.Textual-Exegetical Work   25 minutes

In this portion of the class the teacher will read and provide interpretative background for the text. To save time, the teacher will hand out sheets on which two charts of text structure are printed (See Appendix 1).

The teacher's work in this segment determines the class's direction and content. However, he is receptive to questions--spoken and unspoken--and is sensitive to the class's ability and willingness to understand what the teacher is trying to point out.

3.   Revisiting the "Group Definition" of Conversion

30 minutes

During this portion of the class, the teacher will place

in the class's view their own list of conversion's elements and provide handout sheets on which the same information is printed. He will designate, item-for-item, each of the group's facets, asking how the text modifies, extends, or deepens it.

Class members will offer observations which the teacher will write on news print paper. The aim in this portion of the class is to stimulate ferment in the participants' understandings.

4.Personal Sharing   30 minutes

If students have not at this point in the class begun relating experiences out of their own private spiritual history, the teacher will invite them to do so. This invitation would best arise out of that area in the class's discussion of their "group definition" that seems to generate the most response. In this text, for instance, the students may be intrigued by how the fishers enlist with Jesus quite abruptly with no apparent preparation. In this case, the teacher might ask, "Has anyone here ever decided to do something in your spiritual life on impulse?"

The teacher's work at this point is to encourage students to share what comes to mind. The students' work is to allow the climate in the class to bring to the surface of their thoughts experiences which seem significant, similar to those under study, or apt contributions to the conversation.

Evaluation. This class has the same evaluation plan as that in the first class.

The Second Class Session: April 17, 1994

Description of the Teaching and Learning Process. Once again the class gathered on time in a light and sociable mood. I opened the class with a prayer, passed around an attendance sheet, and, for the sake of first-time attenders, verbally summarized the first session's activities and content. To do this, I prepared handwritten notes taken from my viewing of the previous week's videotape.

Following this, I distributed two of three handout sheets--those dealing with the exegesis of Mark 1.14-20. I then asked a student to read aloud the passage.

My presentation followed the exegetical notes in the lesson plan fairly closely. Unfortunately, my extensive work with the thirteen verses preceding the text took too much time. This was compounded by the fact that the students became fascinated by, and talkative about, the question whether Jesus was self-conscious of his calling to be the Christ and whether his baptism might be considered a conversion.

These digressions left somewhat less time for our study of the Fishers' calls. I did manage in this section to point out Mark's theology of the Kingdom's imminence, the signi-

ficance of the chiastic structure of each of the two call episodes, and the nature of Markan discipleship so far as this is discernable in this text.

It was exactly 10:00 a.m. when I finished the Bible study and distributed sheets on which I had typed the previous Sunday's list of conversion's facets. I asked the students whether they thought that the fishers' calls were conversions. Most class members felt that the word *conversion* was a useful way to describe what happened to the first disciples in Mark. One articulate student suggested that a genuine Christian conversion could not take place until after Pentecost. This idea did not develop in group conversation. A second idea raised by someone else in the group suggested that the disciples reverted to their fishing periodically, only to return to discipleship later. Significantly, this idea lingered into the next class session.

I then asked the class to review, in light of our text, the facets which they had listed the week before. The group adapted readily to this process. Their work on their first element in conversion, "a complete surrender of will," was typical of how they would deal in turn with each facet. At first, many in the group felt that the disciples' ready enlistment to follow Jesus signaled their *complete* surrender of will. As the students discussed the disciples' difficul-

ties and misunderstandings in the remainder of Mark's story, it became evident that the fishers did not surrender their wills entirely. The class decided that following Jesus did not, for his first disciples, equate to a "complete" surrender of their wills.

In like fashion the class took in turn most of the facets on the list. Sometimes they lingered over them and engaged in discussion. At other times, they affirmed by clear consensus that a facet either did or did not belong to an idea of conversion implicit in Mark's story of the fishers' summons to discipleship.

During this portion of the class I found it difficult to record on paper the learners' suggestions and I abandoned using the news print. I felt, and the class agreed, that nothing would be lost by letting the video camera keep our record.

Our adjusted list of facets looked like this as the class drew to a close:

```
-complete surrender of will
     (most felt that a complete surrender was not necessary)
     (only some surrender was necessary)
-recognizing brokenness
     (no evidence for the fishers)
-turmoil-to-inner-peace
     (no evidence for the fishers)
-a life-changing experience
     (yes, for the fishers)
-a sequence of events
     (we didn't know other events for the fishers from this
     text alone)
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-leaves "bad taste"
      (some in the group wonder why this is here)
      (the fishers' conversion might have bothered their
wives)
-re-affirmation of faith
      (we didn't know)
-accepting the gift of grace
      (the fishers didn't really know what is going on or what
      grace was here)
-all things old become new
      (re-newed)
-commitment
      (yes)
      (but when Christ was executed, the disciples weren't
      committed)
-series of little conversions
      (there must have been some preparation by the fishers in
      advance of their dropping everything to follow)
-overblown
      (it was hard to respond to this one)
-faith given without change (for some)
      (in this context, most people hadn't heard of Christ, so
      everyone had to be a convert)
-a wake-up call
      -new awareness of God's previous presence
-connected with the size of the "hole in your heart"
-one-on-one relationship with Jesus
-need is prerequisite
-head knowledge to heart knowledge
-associated with "religious nut"
-different for everybody
-God's choice to "hit ya"
-conflicts with predestination
-is the opposite of slow growth
-openness to Jesus
-comes from the Holy Spirit
-is predestined

      As the class period drew to a close, I asked the group

to name additional facets of conversion which they may have

forgotten. I was trying to get them to notice that commis-

sioning or calling to vocation seemed to be missing. I

finally just told the group that they ought to include *commissioning* to their list.

Near the class's dismissal, members of the group exchanged thoughts about predestination and its role in conversion. They asked such questions as, "Do people have a choice?" or "Does God's role overrule human will?" This conversation, dealing with the roles of God and humans in the converting process, evoked the most dialogue of the morning as participants spoke much more among themselves than to the teacher. Here the learners made more lengthy comments. And they touched upon several central issues in the predestination-versus-free-will debate.

Evaluation. The class members are able both to follow the exegesis and to some degree, confirm, extend, modify, enrich, or negate their working idea of conversion. Our lack of time discipline works to exclude the final half-hour scheduled for personal reflection and sharing. Thus, we have met only our first two of three objectives, namely those concerning the Bible study and modifying our idea of conversion.

In the next class session, it is important that I follow the lesson plan's time schedule. The only change that I implement for the third class is to write the facets list on the newsprint ahead of time so that I need not rewrite each

of the previous ideas. I will supplement this by again handing out updated lists of the facets of conversion that we have generated so far.

VII. THE THIRD CLASS: "THE DAMASCUS ROAD EXPERIENCE

The Lesson Plan

Objectives. This class has the same objectives as those in the second class. The group's study of this text should impress upon them the depth of personal change and the role of other Christians not only in Paul's experience but in many conversions.

Exegetical Work. The exegesis of Acts 9 (see Appendix 2) demonstrates how the Holy Spirit advances the Gospel by overcoming and reversing a notable enemy of the Early Church, namely Paul.

Step-by-Step Description of the Teaching and Learning Process.

1.   Textual-Exegetical Work   30 mi
In this portion of the class the teacher will read and provide interpretative background for the text. To save time, the teacher will hand out sheets on which a chart of

the lesson's text structure is printed which may be used as well to prompt inductive learning.

The teacher's work in this segment determines the class's direction and content. However, he is receptive to questions--spoken and unspoken--and is sensitive to the class's ability and willingness to notice what the teacher is trying to point out.

2.   Revisiting the "Group Definition" of Conversion

30 minutes

In this portion of the class the teacher will place in the class's view their own group definition and distribute sheets on which the same information has been listed. He will designate, item-for-item each of the group's facets, asking how the text modifies, extends, or deepens it.

Class members will offer observations which the teacher will write on news print paper. The aim in this portion of the class is to stimulate ferment in the members' understand-ings.

3.   Personal Sharing   30 mi

The teacher will invite students to continue relating experiences out of their private history. This invitation would best arise out of that area in the class's discussion of their "group definition" that seemed to generate the most response. In this text, for instance, the students may be intrigued by how Saul was an active enemy of the Church and

how completely this was reversed. In this case, the teacher might ask, "Has anyone here ever been in some way an opponent to Christian faith?"

The teacher's work at this point is to encourage students to share what comes to mind. The students' work is to allow the climate in the class to bring to the surface of their thoughts experiences which seem significant, similar to those under study, or apt contributions to the conversation.

Evaluation. This class has the same plan of evaluation as that in the first class.

The Third Class Session: April 24, 1994

Description of the Teaching and Learning Process. The class gathered much as it had in the past. I distributed sheets on which the text of the day had been arranged and printed (See Appendix 1). I announced that I intended to try to move the class more quickly through the Bible study and beyond. After an opening prayer, I asked class members to read each of the five scenes into which I had divided the story of Saul's Damascus Road experience. I ended up reading the text myself using the study sheet.

I began interpreting the text by making comments on its context in Acts. I planted the idea, using both the literary

context and the overall structure of the text, that Saul's "conversion" in Acts 9 represents the reversal of an enemy. Paul moves from being a chief persecutor of the Church into one of its greatest advocates. Part of this movement entails Paul's downward fall as he looses strength. This is followed by his recovering of energy and power through the Holy Spirit.

My presentation of the exegetical points was structured around the sixfold division of the text. I commented on each scene, asking brief questions of the class such as, "What does this remind you of?" or "Where have we seen this before?"

I moved efficiently through the textual study and then asked class members to respond with their thoughts in general. Several questions arose concerning not the text, but conversion. One lady, for instance, asked if conversion was a "great turnaround." Another asked whether conversion is part of other religions.

With these comments, I decided to pass out the sheets with our latest list of conversion's facets. I then asked the group to try to "boil down" our list and sharpen it into something which looks more like a definition.

One student questioned whether, by modifying the list, we weren't loosing previous insights. A second asked where this exercise of modifying the facets was leading. Another

asked whether I was guiding the class on a course toward a definition which I had already determined. Clearly, my methodology of revisiting our working definition and modifying it was now confusing to the students.

I used this opportunity to re-articulate that we were working to become comfortable with and conversant about conversion. This, I went on, could be very helpful for us in those times when we encounter rigid or stereotyped ideas of what conversion is.

With this, we were able to spend the allotted time working to modify our facets. Before we finished working through the list, I asked if there were any facets that the class wished to add to our list. Several suggestions arose. We left this task with a "facets" list as follows:

-complete surrender of will
-recognizing brokenness
-turmoil-to-inner-peace
-a life-changing experience
-a sequence of events
-leaves "bad taste"
-re-affirmation of faith
-accepting the gift of grace
-all things old become new
-commitment
-series of little conversions
-overblown
-faith given without change (for some)
-a wake-up call
-new awareness of God's previous presence
-connected with the size of the "hole in your heart"

-associated with "religious nut"
-different for everybody
-God's choice to "hit ya"
-conflicts with predestination
-is the opposite of slow growth
-openness to Jesus
-comes from the Holy Spirit
-is predestined
-entails commissioning
-not an end product, but a beginning
-another disciple is acting
-irresistible power moves one
-indwelling of Holy Spirit
-different from person to person

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-one-on-one      relationship     -chosenness
with  Jesus                       -disciples  are  called  for
-need is prerequisite                different purposes
-head  knowledge  to  heart       -followed by long period of
    knowledge                        sanctification
```

On occasion, I used class comments to expand with ideas of my own. For instance, one student observed that each person we've heard or studied seemed to have a different conversion, depending on the circumstance. I added to this that the nature of many conversions are determined to some extent by the nature of the vocation to which the convert is called.

I chose this point, with 20 minutes remaining, to move the class on to personal sharing. I made this transition by observing that several of our recent observations about conversion entailed commissioning. I then asked, "Has anyone here ever felt an awareness or fresh awareness that God is calling us to do something or to perform a task?"

One student--speaking for the first time--shared that she felt that God was indeed working on her life at present. While she didn't hear a new calling, it felt to her as if God was getting her ready for some task "down the road." I inquired as to how long she felt that she had been in a converting mode. She responded that elements of her "con-version" reached back into her childhood.

Another student wished that she could have a sudden striking experience. She wished for a conversion because she

felt that this would save her the responsibility to "do it all by faith." I probed deeper, asking what it was that was hard. She said, "I have to do everything by faith. I have to listen very closely."

Another woman felt that churched children were not as likely to be converted, because "they just accept Christianity." She went on to suggest that it is in the tragic or tumultuous times in life that conversion seems likely. "These are the times when God can 'hit' people."

Another woman, not reared in the Church, expressed curiosity over how many in the class were reared in the Church. I took a poll, asking the learners to raise their hands. About 1/3 were not reared in the Church, the rest were. After this, she went on to share that she had a "hellfire and damnation" grandfather. She traced a childhood pattern of visiting different churches and youth groups. After speaking for several minutes, she asked rhetorically, "I wonder if I was looking for something." She was curious whether it is easier for those reared in the Church.

Another woman shared the thought that if the Church were persecuted, or if there were some sort of pressure for Church members to "make up their minds," that this would make Christianity easier.

Two other women expressed that there were times when they were "really angry" with God. These times always ended

when they were able to find their way "back to God." When asked whether such times were transforming, neither woman answered definitively.

The class ended abruptly when time was called. I closed with prayer.

Evaluation. This session exemplifies what I envisioned in the lesson plan. It certainly achieves all three objectives.

There are two minor problems. First, two typing errors--a wrong Bible chapter number on the syllabus and an omitted sentence in the structure and content handout--take a surprisingly high toll in energy to correct.

Second, and much more significant, the class's work on modifying our collective definition or list of elements is getting awkward. The learners themselves are now wondering about this process even though they did good work in this session expanding and deepening their list. At this point, I can't think of any way to improve this part of the lesson plan. Finally, I am aware at this point that the participants have only engaged in personal sharing for twenty minutes as opposed to sixty minutes called for in the lesson plans. I'm guessing that my best solution to these problems is to stick closely to the lesson plan timing for one more session and assess the situation again following that class.

VIII.   THE FOURTH CLASS: "CORNELIUS AND PETER

The Lesson Plan

Objectives. This class has the same objectives as those in the second class. The participants' work with this story should stimulate their awareness of God's converting work not only with those entering the Church, but with established Christians as well.

Exegetical Work. The exegesis of this text (see Appendix 2) emphasizes the degree to which conversion is situation-specific and not limited to those outside Christianity.

Step-by-Step Description of the Teaching and Learning Process.

A. Textual-Exegetical Work   30 minutes

In this portion of the class the teacher will read and provide interpretative background for the lesson. To save time, the teacher will hand out sheets on which charts of text structure are printed (See Appendix 1) which may be used as well to prompt inductive learning.

The teacher's work in this segment determines the class's direction and content. However, he is receptive to

questions--spoken and unspoken--and is sensitive to the class's ability and willingness to notice what the teacher is trying to point out.

B. Revisiting the "Group Definition" of Conversion

30 minutes

In this portion of the class the teacher will place in the class's view their own group definition and hand out sheets on which the same information is printed. He will designate, item-for-item each of the group's facets, asking how the text modifies, extends, or deepens it.

Class members will offer observations which the teacher will write on newsprint paper. The aim in this portion of the class is to stimulate ferment in the members' understandings.

C. Personal Sharing   30 minutes

The teacher will invite students to continue relating experiences out of their private history. This invitation would best arise out of that area in the class's discussion of their "group definition" that seems to generate the most response. For instance, in this class one focus is the idea that Peter, as much as Cornelius, is transformed. The sharing question might be, "Have you ever, after being an established Christian and Church member, experienced a powerful new vision which clarifies the meaning of Christian faith or discipleship?"

The teacher's work at this point is to encourage students to share what comes to mind. The students' work is to allow the climate in the class to bring to the surface of their thoughts experiences which seem significant, similar to those under study, or apt contributions to the conversation.

Evaluation. This class has the same evaluation plan as that in the first class.

The Fourth Class Session: May 1, 1994

Description of the Teaching and Learning Process. I opened the class with two extraneous announcements which pertained to parish business. After offering an invocation, I began talking about Acts' overall plan in which the spread of the Gospel radiated in all geographic directions. Thus, by the time we get to the Tenth Chapter, I explained, the Word is reaching beyond the Jewish world. The text's layout on the handout sheet made it clear that I wished to compare and contrast Peter and Cornelius. The question of who was being transformed was a centerpiece in this lesson.

I guided the class through each of the scenes which make up this long passage. Following each scene, I offered comments and insights from my notes and entertained remarks from the class. The group was clearly comfortable with and engaged in the study. Their comments reflected thoughtful-

ness and insight. I found myself repeatedly complimenting the class's perspicacity.

Following the Bible study, one student declared that "everyone in the story is getting converted, including Peter." I underlined this idea by suggesting that, while Cornelius experiences many of the facets of conversion which we've listed, Peter actually experiences more.

This led naturally into a conversation about conversion, especially the aspect of conversion as a continual or repeated process rather than a solitary momentous spiritual event. The class was so engaged in this, that I allowed the conversation to continue for the remainder of the time, about 45 minutes. During this session we made no attempt to modify the list of conversion's facets.

Taking turns, the class moved from one individual to the next.

One man, an elder in his 70's, remembered moving into and out of church life during his young adulthood. For him, conversion was the move back into the community. He cited his Air Force service days as a particularly non-spiritual time in his life. It was, however, shortly after this that he joined our church. Under the guidance of several lay leaders in those days, he came to be established in a relationship with the congregation which has continued through his adult life.

A nurse in her early thirties described praying for God's guidance in her recent decision whether or not to have a third baby. During her discernment process she became, through birth control failure, pregnant. She took this to be a strong indication of God's activity in her life which she called a "conversion" and the richest spiritual experience in her life so far.

A single mother of three described feeling isolated in an apartment building near our church building. She so needed the warmth of the congregation's welcome that this alone felt transforming to her.

Another member, a man in his mid-60's suggested that conversion is for those who need a more powerful jolt. Others who are nurtured in the faith, he asserted, find themselves where God wants them without the jolt or "thunderbolt" of a second birth experience.

A man in his 50's spoke of two "mountaintop experiences:" his baptism at age 21, and his recent experience with a "Walk to Emmaus" weekend. The latter helped this learner to recognize a vast void in his life and relationships which cried out to be filled by a much more active response to Christ.

During this conversation, I functioned to clarify, ("So, I'm hearing that your experience was like a conversion for you") and to help speakers share more personally, ("Is that

your experience?").   I also looked for themes that ran

through several remarks.   Thus, after many people had shared

in this session, I suggested:

> There seems to be a strong awareness in the room
> that a conversion is particular to the situation
> we're in.   If this is true, do we want to call,
> say, Paul's conversion--which has been called the
> prototype of all conversions--the model?   Is this
> legitimate?

Following this question, a participant in his 50's told

this story:

> There once was a minister who was walking in a
> graveyard at night and he fell into an open grave.
> Afraid he might die, he has a converting religious
> experience.   Later, after he is rescued, he tries
> to get his parishioners converted by persuading
> them to walk in the graveyard at night.

This story launched the group on a discussion of conver-

sion experiences in revivalistic settings.   Several funny

stories emerged.

One man in his forties told of childhood church services

where the evangelist would not dismiss the congregation until

everyone came up the aisle to the front of the church.

Another told of his childhood experience of "Aunt Effie with

the beehive hairdo" who menacingly chased him up the church

aisle to be "saved."   I raised a question, only to be ignored

by the group, concerning the theology of conversion that must

be operating in such situations.

Finally, I asked class members to raise their hands if,

for whatever motivation, they had ever responded to an altar call. Ten hands were raised. Then, I asked how many walked forward under some kind of duress. Seven hands went up.

At this point, the approaching end of the hour had the class members agitated and ready to move to their next activity.

Evaluation. Despite the fact that I omit the lesson plan's middle section in this class, I believe that all three objectives are reached. The group's work on *conversion's* definition and their personal recollections seem to merge in the general discussion which dominates half the class.

More importantly, the level of conversational intimacy has gotten quite rich in this session. Many members are now indeed sharing recollections and speaking about religious experience. The lengthy stretch of personal sharing in this hour represents good recovery from the lack of sharing in the first three sessions.

The fact that both the learners and I, the teacher, did not want to delve into the facets list may indicate that a fresh approach is necessary. After pondering several possibilities, I decide to ask the group in the next session to narrow their definition by describing conversion in terms of "who, what, where, why, and how."

IX. THE FIFTH CLASS: "JESUS AND NICODEMUS"

The Lesson Plan

Objectives. This class has the same objectives as those
in the second class. Specifically, this session aims to
bring clarity to participant's understanding of the new birth
concept.

Exegetical Work. The exegesis of John 3.1-15 (see
Appendix 2)--the famous Johannine conversation between Jesus
and Nicodemus--makes clear the meaning of the new birth and
its connection to faith in Jesus.

Step-by-Step Description of the Teaching and Learning
Process.

A.Textual-Exegetical Work   30 minutes

In this portion of the class the teacher will read and
provide interpretative background for the text. To save time,
the teacher will hand out sheets on which a chart of text
structure are printed (See Appendix 1) which may be used as
well to prompt inductive learning.

The teacher's work in this segment determines the
class's direction and content. However, he is receptive to
questions--spoken and unspoken--and is sensitive to the
class's ability and willingness to notice what the teacher is

trying to point out.

B.   Revisiting the "Group Definition" of Conversion

30 minutes

In this portion of the class the teacher will pass out copies of the class's list of conversion's facets.   He will then invite them to try to conceptualize conversion by answering the newspaper reporter's questions: who, where, what, why, and how.

Class members will offer observations which the teacher will write on news print paper.   The aim in this portion of the class is to stimulate ferment in the members' understandings.

C. Personal Sharing   30 minutes

The teacher will invite students to continue relating experiences out of their private histories.   This invitation would best arise out of that area in the class's discussion of their "group definition" that seemed to generate the most response.   In this text, for instance, the students may be intrigued by the double meanings of *gennethe anothen*.   In this case, the teacher might ask, "Has anyone here ever felt that "birth from above" might better describe your experience that being "born again?"

The teacher's work at this point is to encourage students to share what comes to mind.   The students' work is to allow the climate in the class to bring to the surface of

their thoughts experiences which seem significant, similar to those under study, or apt contributions to the conversation.

Evaluation. This class has the same evaluation plan as that in the first class.

The Fifth Class Session: May 8, 1994

The Teaching and Learning Process. Class members--in their usual relaxed mood--were still entering the room at 9:05 a.m. My assistant was distributing the handout sheets as the participants arrived.

After opening with prayer, I asked for a volunteer to read the lesson. After one student reads, I commented on the context and structure of the lesson according to the exegesis in the lesson plan. During most of the exegesis time, I elaborated on the multiple translations of *gennethe anothen*, and other translation subtleties. The class was attentive, but less animated than in previous weeks.

Instead of asking for more facets or modifications to our growing concept of conversion, I invited the class to work on our concept in terms of "who, what, where, why, and how." I began by writing, "who" at the top of the news print and asked who were the actors in conversion. The group began its list:

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-all people
-those who ask
-those called by the Spirit to respond
-and are baptized
-baptism is not necessary
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The group began to ponder baptism and its place in or relationship to conversion. In the midst of this conversation, one woman compared baptism with the wedding ceremony, stating that the wedding, like baptism, symbolically shows forth what already exists. I used this comment to make a point about how conversion and entrance into the Christian life was not exhausted by a single element. I did this by pointing out that no single element in marriage is the essence of marriage. Marriage consists of love, commitment, vows, sex, cohabitation, a legal license, separation from parents, acknowledgment by friends, and other elements. These elements work together.

I likened this to our thoughts on "who" is converted. Converted people possess a variety experiences. And baptism--returning to the point where we digressed from the topic--is an element in the conversion process. In other words, it is a "weird" Christianity where baptism is not present.

The class discussion became more energized at this point around the question of infant baptism. One member asserted, and others agreed, that we ought to baptize twice, once at birth and again when persons can make a confession of faith. I chose, as the teacher, not to engage this topic at all.

Instead I wrote "when" on the newsprint and invited the class to consider when conversion takes place. The list began to develop:

    -anytime
    -during times of change
    -at age of understanding

This final suggestion prompted the class to linger on when a person is old enough to understand. The conversation drifted into a discussion of confirmation of baptism.

Another member suggested that those who have gone through hard times are likely candidates for conversion. I asked the class to ponder whether the biblical characters we've studied were transformed during hard times. The group found no evidence of hard times or difficulty as preceding conversion.

The discussion wandered onto the topic of the role of understanding in the conversion process. A woman asked if adolescence is the most likely time for a second birth experience. By this time several themes seemed to be operating in the group's thinking.

Finally, one member asserted that all of these questions can be answered by reference to the Holy Spirit. Who, for example, is a convert? Whomever the Holy Spirit chooses. When? Whenever the Holy Spirit chooses, and so on. This member went on to recall that, as our lesson put it, the initiative is "from above."

The simplicity of this answer provoked another class member to speak on behalf of human initiative. He suggested that the time in life for conversion is when a person is receptive.

I chose this point for our transition into the personal sharing portion of the class. I asked the group, "We're looking at these questions theoretically, asking who and when. How about our own experience, which we know best? What has been your own experience? Anybody care to share about yourself?"

It was during this discussion that one woman in her early thirties, having been reared in a non-church family, shared that she found, in her childhood home, Bible story books. These had a permanent effect on her life. She described reading the stories and crying. Upon saying this, she became tearful and paused. She went on to describe how she had gone to a Bible class during "release time" at a local United Church of Christ. She then mentioned, but did not elaborate on, a "shattering experience" in her childhood which she was able to interpret in the light of the stories which she had been reading.

Another student--a man--broke in, saying that he was sure that for the woman, God's "determinism" was "written all over her experience." He went on to say that while his parents never participated in any religious experiences, he

always ended up in a Sunday School in one place or another.

The class drew to a close with a return to comments about the meaning of predestination, determinism, and human free will. I asked whether anyone in the class ever got the feeling that those who claim to be "born again" were arrogating to themselves credit for the experience.

One man stated that, in his experience, "born again" people do not minimize God's role. Another man related his own encounter with a "young man" who was "on fire for the Lord." But surprisingly this young man blatantly "put down" his wife because she had not had the second birth experience. This behavior seemed to imply that the young man had taken credit for his conversion.

The group concluded this session by speaking of being born again or from above very comfortably. This suggested that the exegesis had exerted quiet influence over the whole session.

Evaluation. This session meets all three objectives. Group members are clearly comfortable discussing conversion and increasingly willing to share out of their own private spiritual journeys.

Much of this session's conversation seems tangential to the subject of conversion. We speak at length about baptism, marriage, and predestination. I am not, however, inclined to

attempt to constrain the group from taking such detours and exploratory tours of subjects related to conversion. This may be the class's way of exploring the subject and finding its own way into deeper understanding.

X.   THE SIXTH CLASS: "THE SENDING OF MOSES"

The Lesson Plan

Objectives. This class has the same objectives as those in the second class. In the light of this text, the participants will see again the importance of commissioning in biblical theophanies.

Exegetical Work. The exegesis of Exodus 3.1-12 (see Appendix 2) accentuates the element of call or commissioning in Moses' transforming experience at the Burning Bush. Further, it explores the individuality or situation-specific nature of Moses' spiritual experience.

Step-by-Step Description of the Teaching and Learning Process.

Textual-Exegetical Work   30 mi

In this portion of the class the teacher will read and provide interpretative background for the text. To save time,

the teacher will hand out sheets on which a chart of text structure are printed (See Appendix 1) which may be used as well to prompt inductive learning.

The teacher's work in this segment determines the class's direction and content. However, he is receptive to questions--spoken and unspoken--and is sensitive to the class's ability and willingness to notice what the teacher is trying to point out.

Revisiting the "Group Definition" of Conversion

30 minutes

In this portion of the class the teacher will pass out copies of the class's list of conversion's facets. He will then invite them to try to conceptualize conversion by answering the newspaper reporter's questions: who, where, what, why, and how.

Class members will offer observations which the teacher will write on newsprint paper. The aim in this portion of the class is to stimulate ferment in the members' understandings.

Personal Sharing   30 mi

The teacher will invite students to continue relating experiences out of their private histories. This invitation would best arise out of that area in the class's discussion of their "group definition" that seemed to generate the most response. In this text, for instance, the students may be

intrigued by how Moses is such an active agent in shaping his commissioning and influencing YHWH. In this case, the teacher might ask, "Have you ever felt that your own prayers or wishes were incorporated by God in your calling or conversion?"

The teacher's work at this point is to encourage students to share what comes to mind. The students' work is to allow the climate in the class to bring to the surface of their thoughts experiences which seem significant, similar to those under study, or apt contributions to the conversation.

Evaluation. This class has the same evaluation plan as that in the first class.

The Sixth Class Session: May 15, 1994

The Teaching and Learning Process. I began the sixth class by sharing with the group my affection for the story of Moses' calling. I offered the opening prayer. And I oversaw the distribution of the two study sheets and Bibles.

After reading Exodus 3.1-12, I moved through the Bible study portion of the class according to my notes in the lesson plan. There was little class interaction in this segment of the lesson.

Following the exegesis, I invited the class to review our list of conversion's facets plus the "who" and "when"

questions about conversion. "Which of these," I asked, "seems to be most descriptive of what Moses is going through here?" The class chose:

    -life changing experience
    -a wake-up call
    -God's choice to "hit ya"
    -is predestined
    -entails commissioning
    -not an end product, but a beginning
    -irresistible power moves one
    -different from person to person

as descriptive of Moses' experience.

Following this, I invited the class to revisit our exercise in determining the "who, when, where, why, and how" of conversion. Before the class began its work on "where" conversion takes place, I drew an analogy of what we seemed to be discovering about conversion. I compared it to a child's "face book" where different face parts are printed on pages. There are several pages of hair styles, several eyes, several noses, and so on. This allows a child to create dozens of different combinations.

Conversion is similar. Each individual embodies his or her personal configuration of elements. The "who, when, where, why, and how" combines to make every conversion unique.

As to the "where" of conversion, the class quickly produced two ideas:

    -anywhere

-where you're alone

I encouraged the participants to ponder whether aloneness is a prerequisite for conversion. I asked them to review the biblical characters we had studied so far. In this conversation, one woman suggested that the fishers in Mark were not converts, but young men who came to Jesus seeking adventure in order to escape the drudgery of fishing.

At this point, I began to think "out loud" suggesting that, in each of our Bible studies, the physical location of conversion oddly pertained to the content of the conversion. The fishers at the sea shore would soon be fishers of people. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, was on his way to a Gentile city when he was called. Moses was at the foot of the very mountain which would one day be where he would discharge an important part of his commission.

I then told the story of my own adolescent conversion on the beach of Fort Lauderdale. I didn't share all of the details. But I moved to the point where one of my first impulses in the course of this conversion was a desire to join the beach evangelists and "witness" to others. This, I suggested, was an early inkling of my vocation of Christian leadership. One class member was curious about other details in my experience. So, I spent several more minutes answering her questions.

The class finally added that conversion takes place

wherever a person is open to God.

I then asked the group the "why" of conversion. They listed and discussed:

    -predestined
    -purpose, commission
    -to be a role model for others

One woman suggested that one reason "why" we are converted is to go on a great adventure. The great adventure, she added, is to get reconnected with the "God-part" of oneself.

Another suggested that we can, like Cornelius, also be commissioned to do little things for others. Cornelius, he explained, may not have done great things as did Paul, but he might have influenced someone who does great things.

I pondered this. "Maybe the size of the conversion has to do with the size of the commissioning." We thought further, and tentatively decided that this could not be the case. A woman cited the example of Corrie Ten Boom who didn't have a "big" conversion experience, but has had an important influence.

I paused to interpret our conversation to that point:

    There's something that is just simmering beneath
    the surface of the class today. There's a sense
    that the conversion experience is really connected
    with the rest of life. I didn't say that well
    enough. It's as if the conversion experience is a
    seed or germ of what happens. It's like with
    Moses. All of the threads of his life seemed to be
    represented in his conversion. This means that

every conversion would be unique.

I then read a section out of Bill Bright's booklet, <u>How</u> <u>You Can Be Sure You are a Christian</u>:

> You must receive Jesus Christ as God your Lord and Savior. By receiving Christ you can know and experience God's loving plan for your life. You receive Christ through faith by personally inviting him into your life...Receiving Christ begins by turning away from yourself, repenting of your sins. It involves trusting Christ to come into your life and to make you the person he wants you to be.[135]

I asked the group, "How does that feel?"

One learner suggested that during Jesus' life he was taking more initiative with people, not waiting for them to invite him in.

Another learner felt that this statement was a good representation of the biblical idea of conversion. He cited the words, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," as evidence.

Another student felt that Bill Bright gives too much initiative to the believer. Another student, still, felt that the statement clarified the nature of the response to Christ's initiative which was required.

With about 15 minutes remaining, I moved to the final portion of the class, asking "Maybe you didn't have a conversion experience. But have you ever had an experience where you moved to clarity on what you were supposed to do?"

The first response came from a woman who shared that she

felt called to her volunteer work in advocacy for victims of child sexual abuse. She became certain of this vocation about two years before. She felt that this calling was from God because she was no longer troubled by bouts of depression. All of this coincided with her return to active membership in our congregation. When I asked whether she considered this a conversion, she responded by saying, "Yes, I guess it is. Without some kind of change, I never could do the work."

The next person to share was the woman who had the spiritual experience in her office.[136] Through this, she had reached a sense of commissioning or even command to become a psychologist.

I asked whether she felt the experience was a conversion. She responded saying that she didn't know. I held up Bill Bright's book. "Your experience looks a whole lot more like Moses than it looks like this."

A young mother who had, two years before, lost an infant child, told about her grief recovery period and her informal work today helping others in grief situations. She suggested that this "little vocation" could be something to which God called her.

The conversation lingered over the thought that God's commissioning does not spell out our entire life's course, only the first step or two. This seemed to square with

Moses' experience.

An older member remembered his own early days in our church. During this time our congregation was in the midst of relocating. He told about being on the pulpit committee which called the pastor who provided the necessary leadership to accomplish the task. He also remembered the trouble it was to conduct worship in a local school. For his part, he carried hymnbooks in the trunk of his car. Evidently, he felt pride and a sense of God's calling to be a participant in that time for the church. As he looked at the church today, he realized how important those times were.

The class ended abruptly with the completion of our allotted time. I closed with a prayer.

Evaluation. Clearly, all of the objectives have been met in this class period. The group is now showing considerable ability to speak about religious experiences. Further, members in the group are remembering incidents which they had not thought of as resembling conversions.

Also, the theme of commissioning--central to the text under study--exerted an influence which continued through the entire period. We seemed, more than before, to be sharing in the light of the text which we studied.

XI. THE SEVENTH CLASS: "ISAIAH IN THE TEMPLE"

The Lesson Plan

Objectives. This class has the same objectives as those in the second class. This final text will stretch the participants' understanding of conversion by showing how situation-specific and difficult Isaiah's calling was.

Exegetical Work. The exegesis of Isaiah 6.1-13 (see Appendix 2) focuses on the difficulties of determining whether this incident is a mid-career experience for the prophet or an initial call to the vocation of a prophet. Further, it ponders the thoroughly negative nature of Isaiah's calling, namely to harden the hearts of the people of Judah, paradoxically bringing on YHWH's judgment God rather than averting it.

Step-by-Step Description of the Teaching and Learning Process.

1. Textual-Exegetical Work   30 minutes

In this portion of the class the teacher will read and provide interpretative background for the text. To save time, the teacher will hand out photocopied sheets on which the Revised Standard Version of the text is printed.

The teacher's work in this segment determines the

class's direction and content. However, he is receptive to questions--spoken and unspoken--and is sensitive to the class's ability and willingness to notice what the teacher is trying to point out.

2. Revisiting the "Group Definition" of Conversion

30 minutes

The teacher will place in the class's view their own group definition. He will designate, item-for-item each of the group's facets, asking how the text modifies, extends, or deepens it.

Class members will offer observations which the teacher will write on newsprint paper. The aim in this portion of the class is to stimulate ferment in the members' understandings.

3.   Personal Sharing   30 mi

The teacher will invite students to continue relating experiences out of their private history. This invitation would best arise out of that area in the class's discussion of their "group definition" that seemed to generate the most response. In this text, for instance, the students may be intrigued by how God's call for Isaiah was particularly difficult and even unpleasant. In this case, the teacher might ask, "Has anyone here ever felt called by God to do something you really found distasteful?"

The teacher's work at this point is to encourage

students to share what comes to mind. The students' work is to allow the climate in the class to bring to the surface of their thoughts experiences which seem significant, similar to those under study, or apt contributions to the conversation.

Evaluation. This class has the same evaluation plan as that in the first class.

The Seventh Class Session: May 22, 1994

The Teaching and Learning Process. I opened with the thought that our lesson from Isaiah was the most difficult of all our lessons.

After an opening prayer, I read the text from Isaiah. The Bible study segment adhered closely to the exegetical notes. It was nevertheless difficult for me to make interpretation points from the context.

The structure of Isaiah's call was easier to interpret. So was the content. The class followed and participated in this portion of the class uneventfully.

After I finished the exegesis, summarized it, and answered questions, one student asked what all of this had to do with conversion.

This provided me with an opportunity to discuss the challenges of studying conversion in the Scriptures. I first explained that the standard words for conversion did not

appear commonly in the Bible. This, I went on, makes it difficult to decide whether we're looking at a conversion in any given text--even the Damascus Road stories. I went on:

> What we're left with, is having to go to the text and find things which happen to people which bear a resemblance to what we understand as conversion. Then, we must begin to ask how God interacts with people in the Bible and how can that speak to our understanding of conversion. We may decide that Isaiah's experience isn't a conversion at all.

The student pressed the issue. "I don't see Isaiah's experience as transforming."

I spoke to the methodological issue of trying to mine the Bible for insight about conversion which, as a term, is not plentiful in the text.

I said the following:

> I could go and say that I'm going to teach you what the Bible says about conversion. Then, I would go to texts which I, as the teacher, think are telling us about conversion...I would say, "See here, students. The Bible says X, Y, and Z." What we have tended to do is to find my own definition in the text. Instead of teaching you something about the Bible, I've taught you something about my opinions.

The student responded:

> That's where my confusion comes from. In my mind, I can't get rid of conversion as change, transformation, doing a 180^0 turn. Yet, you keep using references about commissioning and answering God's call. I guess what I want to know is whether conversion is closely tied in with answering God's call or commissioning.

I replied:

> I think it is. But that doesn't mean that it's only that. But it doesn't matter what Doug thinks.

More urgently, she said:

> It does matter. It matters because I and others are in here trying to see if various experiences we've had fit the mold.

I went on:

> And I'm thinking that the mold isn't very mold-like. Probably your experience parallels those of people in the Scriptures. If you take a mold, say Pat's (our guest in the first class session) experience as the mold, how would your experience fit with that?

She replied:

> Very well.

I said:

> But some of us are saying that our experiences aren't like that. The trap we can get into is that the people we talk to about conversion tend to create the mold. I'm saying, "Let's not let the mold get too tight." Because there are a lot of things going on in the Scriptures about God's encounter with people. Some of it is transforming-- many times. Some of it has to do with sin. Sometimes it is something completely different. I believe that is much freer and much more exciting. And I think we can find ourselves in those experiences in Scripture more than we can in some stereotyped view of conversion that sometimes flies around.

Another woman felt that Isaiah's experience fits her idea of conversion. In her childhood, she explained, her church taught about conversion which entailed the elements we worked with today in our lesson. It included confession, forgiveness, and new status.

Another participant, referring to the remark about conversion being a 180^0 turning, described her sense that transformation for her is a series of little turns. Ultimately, these in aggregate mount up and constitute major change.

With this I divulged more of the methodology which lies behind what the class had done. This time I explained Wittgenstein's rope as it illustrates definition. I concluded that no single strand always is present in *conversion*. Conversion, I explained, isn't always, say, religious experience or confession of sin or whatever.

I moved on to ask if the idea of conversion had become more comfortable for members of the class.

One member said that what she had learned softens the impressions she received growing up. In her case, conversion 0was construed in a rigid or dramatic way. This contrasted with the protracted process of her own conversion.

Another woman who had had a conversion, said that she continued to feel sinful and unacceptable after that. But hearing that conversion can be a process, she was finding it

easier to be more loving and accepting of herself. The message she got in her childhood was that conversion would transform her into a good person forever after. When she felt herself to be not so good, she was very distressed.

I attempted to get the class to work on the "how" of conversion, but the group seemed interested in spending the final minutes sharing with one another various everyday experiences which seemed to be infused with God's presence and work.

Evaluation. Except for the exegetical portion of this session, the planned three-fold structure was lost. However, the conversation continued to be rich and is certainly a reflection on the spiritual experiences of class members.

The class's willingness to share freely and at a depth which was not evident in the early classes is a good indication that the course's overall goals are being achieved and that we are ready to finish.

XII. THE EIGHTH CLASS: "EVALUATION"

The Lesson Plan

Objectives. The aim of the eighth class is to reveal student learning and transformation. We will accomplish this

through the following:

1.   The class members will exercise their growing understandings by discussing how they might help someone who is distressed over the subject of conversion.

2.   The class members will communicate ways that transformation has taken place as a result of the class. They will do this by writing down and sharing aloud something that God is doing in their lives as a result of their participation in this course.

3.   Class members will reveal how the course has produced discoveries and outcomes other than those described in the course goals. They will do this by sharing these aloud or writing them on a questionnaire.

The Theory Which Informs this Class Session.

1.   Words, Definition, and the Bible

Many of the insights concerning definition and the presence of explicit conversion language in the Bible which were discussed in the first class session lesson plan continue to be valid here.

2.   Christian Community and Small Groups

This, and all of these classes, are conducted in the assumption that when Christians gather, recall God's acts in their own and other's lives, and study the scriptures, that Christ in the Holy Spirit is an active presence among them.

The kind of learning sought in these classes is not primarily what can be presented by an expert, but what grows out of faithful remembering and sharing in Christian community.

The use of groups--gathering in Christ's name--is a fundamental locus for the propagation of faith and advancement of God's sovereignty. The original band of disciples were a small group. This pattern was continued in the house church tradition. Even the Trinity--the divine in oneness and diversity--suggests that God is relational in essence.

This class, primarily dedicated to assessing the course's results, presumes that God is active in groups of disciples. Assuming this, we inquire boldly as to what may be happening. The combination of sharing questions and openness is designed to shed light on what has in fact transpired over the course of eight weeks.

Step-by-Step Description of the Teaching and Learning Process.

1. First Sharing Question   30 minutes

The class will read a short dialogue in which a former church member shares with me her anxiety over the fact that she hasn't had a second birth experience. I will then ask the class how they would respond to this parishioner. The question is open ended and the teacher will be receptive of

student's struggles questions, and remarks about the class process.

       2.Second Sharing Question   45 minutes

The teacher will invite the class to deepen their sharing intimacy by asking them to think about, write down, and then share with the group ways that God has been active in their lives in and through this class experience. The point of this question is to determine what has been happening over the course of the class. A second and more important aim is to foster awareness of God's immediate activity in the midst of the group. This sharing itself has promise of being transforming.

       3.Closing Comments or Questions   15 minutes

The teacher will close the class by distributing the teacher evaluation questionnaire. He will make final remarks which seem appropriate. And he will invite members to do likewise.

<u>Evaluation</u>. The formal evaluation of all eight classes will be accomplished during and after this, the final session. At this time, the teacher will ask students the first sharing question concerning the person having difficulty with her personal experience with conversion. Student responses to this exercise will reveal the degree to which they understand the difficulties involved in

establishing *conversion's* definition. It will further reveal whether students are comfortable discussing conversion and religious experience.

A second sharing exercise will determine whether personal transformation has resulted from the classes. It is: "Tell about one way that God has been changing you through our time of study together." Responses to this exercise will reveal the degree to which personal religious change has taken place.

At the end of the final class, the teacher will give students a written questionnaire designed to determine the degree which the class goals have been achieved and how the teacher helped or hindered the progress of the class.

Finally, the teacher, along with an educational consultant, will evaluate a videotape of each class. The aim here is to determine what outcomes have been achieved through this teaching and learning process. Further, the videotape will help assess the teacher. It will assist him in determining aspects of his teaching style and whether he fulfilled the teaching plan.

The Eighth Class Session: May 29, 1994

The Teaching and Learning Process. The final class gathered as in the past. As participants were sitting down, we passed out handout sheets. I opened with a prayer and

then asked the group to read the verbatim conversation with Gladys.

After several minutes, I asked, "What would you say to Gladys?"

One elderly member said that Gladys needed to "lighten up."

I challenged this response by reminding the class that conversion is not the kind of topic which is easy to take lightly.

Another woman suggested that Gladys need not worry because the born again experience is something which God works within us. It is not a human achievement. She went on to observe that Gladys' life seemed to be Christ-led. Perhaps Gladys was putting too much emphasis on one big experience and not noticing God's ongoing work in her life.

Another man, who had actually spoken with Gladys about this subject, had encouraged her to look at her own life as evidence for her relationship with God.

Several others added remarks about the exemplary way Gladys lived her life.

I pressed the class at this point, reminding them that good works do not earn God's acceptance. Rather, we are received by God through God's grace. Maybe Gladys was worrying about this very issue. Maybe she just hadn't had the experience which confirmed God's acceptance of her.

One young woman said with confidence that

...You need to talk with people who worry about not having the right experience. You need to see if other transforming experiences might be an unrecognized conversion.

Another interpreted Gladys' anxiety as arising because many around her had undergone a certain kind of experience. This learner went on to say that she herself knew what that was like.

I asked, "What then do you say to yourself?"

She answered that conversion and spiritual experience was "...so individual. Some people have big exciting things happen. For others, it comes in little spurts."

Someone asked for more details about Gladys and her husband's life. One of our long-tenured members filled in some of their family background.

I pressed on, saying, doesn't Jesus say that you must be born again? Shouldn't we be paying attention to that?

A woman answered that in her childhood Southern Baptist church they pressed the born again experience. But in other churches it is not nearly so big a thing.

Another student asked, "Can't you make a conscious decision to be born again? I never thought that being born again always had to be a conversion experience."

I interpreted: "Maybe Gladys could have done it as an act of will, like choosing Christianity or asking Jesus to

come into her life."

One student, apologizing for speaking without having attended all the classes, asked if we have defined the meaning of being "born again."

I asked the class to answer the question.

One learner recalled that the Greek word means "born from above." I expanded on this explaining a bit of the translation issue.

A woman recalled the old story of the religious man caught in the flood. As the waters rise, neighbors offer in succession, to help the man. First, comes a small boat; then a big boat; then a helicopter. All these the man turns down, saying, "God will rescue me." After he drowns, God says that indeed he had come to the man in the form of the boats and helicopter. The woman wondered if we don't sometimes fail to get the message in the way that God sends it. "Maybe," she reflected, "we have a preconceived idea how our experience should be."

After several more minutes of talking about Gladys, I shifted the group's focus by asking an unplanned question: "How has your mind changed about conversion in the last eight weeks?"

One woman reported that she feels much more comfortable with the idea of conversion. Before she didn't relish the born again idea. Now, she sees it as more and more connected

with her whole Christian experience.

A man said that "the significant thing about Paul's conversion is not that he fell off his horse, but what he did with his life afterward."

A woman--a nursing supervisor--went on to share how she has used the exegetical material pertaining to Moses' call as part of the retooling of the mission statement of a local hospital. Apparently, the hospital, in the midst of change, seemed to her comparable to the Hebrews in the wilderness. Some of the travelers were, for example, more willing to journey than others. The organization experiences itself in a "wilderness period." Apparently, some of our insights into Moses' call--especially his reluctance--were directly appropriated into the hospital's mission statement.

Another learner felt much more comfortable with the idea of conversion. More importantly, she felt more comfortable with the idea that this has not happened to her.

Another was particularly struck by the variety of people's experiences. The class made her "think about this."

I shared that I too had learned things in the course of working on these materials. I cited the Cornelius story as an illustration of how God transforms the Church along with those who are being embraced by it. I suggested that we at Central Church needed to be receptive of the Spirit's changes in us which would enable us to receive others.

Another student said that he had been surprised how different the Scriptures are from our traditional idea of conversion. The Scriptures, he added, highlight the "God aspect" of how conversion works instead of our own initiative.

I asked him if he identifies more with the "traditional view of conversion, or what we have discovered in the Scriptures." He said that the most significant conversions seemed to be the God-initiated ones.

I shifted focus again, asking the class to write on the handout sheet which asks: "Tell about one way which God has been changing you through our time together."

After several minutes, one learner said that the class had shown him that there are a lot of people like him who have not had a blinding flash of lightening. He also felt less guilty about not having a second birth experience. He felt a confirmation of what he believes and how the Presbyterian Church has handled the issue of conversion.

I shared with the class that I have learned and been impressed by the degree that I felt God working in the lives of class members. If we hadn't worked to share these experiences I would have never known this.

I returned to the question, "What is God doing in your life as a result of these classes?" The group was quieter than it had been before. I asked if that was a scary ques-

tion. Some participants nodded that it was.

Finally, a woman said that the Scripture lessons which we had used impressed upon her that she too is commissioned to share her faith with others. And she had, like Moses, been resisting this.

Another participant had found that outside the class the topic of conversion had come up in various conversations. She felt much more comfortable and knowledgeable talking about it. Her resistance to this topic wasn't what it used to be.

I asked her, "What was tight (resistant) before?"

She responded. "I think I was trying too hard. I was wondering, why God wasn't talking to me." She is able to relax and accept her own experience much better now.

Another woman said that the class had helped her realize that she can't do everything that she may see others doing in their faith. "What we're called to do is individual. I don't have to feel pressured to do things--like teaching Sunday School--that I'm not comfortable with."

Another said, "For me it's okay to be individual. If you don't accept who you are as being different from someone else, you can't be fully yourself. It also helps me to accept others in their differences. In the past I would compare myself to someone else whose life served as a template for my own."

I closed the class by passing out the final question-

naire. I asked the group to submit them to me either on that day or in the future. I also thanked the class for their participation. I shared that I've been freshly impressed how well the Scriptures had worked.

The group remained seated. Some students were filling out the questionnaire. In this moment one man asked, "For whose benefit did you conduct this class--was it for us or for you?"

I used this question to explain some of the background to the class's development. I also explained a bit about the Doctor of Ministry process and how the data I gather from this experience will be used.

Evaluation. Clearly, all of this class session's objectives were met. The participants, by this point, are demonstrating not only comfort in discussing conversion but also in sharing about their own religious experiences. Put differently, this class succeeds in gathering much of the data necessary to determine what has been happening with the learners over the course of the last eight weeks.

We are now in a position to turn to our final evaluation of not only the course's goals but also other outcomes and insights that have come forth from this experience. This will occupy the next and final chapter of this report.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CLASS IN RETROSPECT

I. INTRODUCTION

In preparation for this final evaluative chapter, I
telephoned several of the participants to ask questions about
what our course, "Conversion In Retrospect" had meant to
them. Their responses were--somewhat to my surprise--
uniformly positive. I hesitated to call one couple, a
husband and wife who have been unimpressed with my ministry
lately. Feeling secure in the glowing comments I had
received to that point, however, I decided that I could
afford some criticism.

I was not disappointed. Both husband and wife assured
me that nothing significant had happened for them during the
course. He was forthright: "Most of it was boring."

This couple was appreciative, however, of the two
guests. Neither the man nor his wife had ever talked with
anyone who had experienced a conversion. I was surprised at
this and asked for more information. She explained that both
of them had always been deeply involved Presbyterians and had
usually socialized with friends from their various churches.

The issue of conversion had never come up.

It was for this reason that they were apprehensive about participating in the course, and wondered whether conversion was going to be forced upon them. They were quickly reassured by the "genuineness" of the guests.

Even more than this, they were surprised and relieved when one participant, an admired adult Sunday School teacher, announced in the first class that he had not had a conversion.

> I figured that if anyone in our church had had a conversion it would be [this participant], and he said that the bolt of lightening had never hit him. That made me much more comfortable because it had never hit me either.

This couple's response to my evaluative questions was negative. No, they didn't feel any more equipped to talk about conversion. No, they hadn't changed their minds about conversion or their own experiences. No, the class was not a significant spiritual experience. If anything, the class helped this couple freshly appreciate the fact of their seamless tenure in Presbyterian churches. The woman couldn't imagine what it would be like to feel so separated from a congregation that it would require a conversion to get on board.

The conversation found its way to the subject of his recent health problems. He reminded me that five years ago he was diagnosed with a grave illness. His doctors predicted

that he would live for a year. He went on to say, "Here I am doing great. I've often asked God why he has given me all this extra time."

"What does God say?" I asked.

"He doesn't answer. But my wife and I have decided to spend most of our time helping people. That's what we've done."

"Maybe that's the answer," I suggested.

"Maybe," he said whimsically.

I pressed, "Maybe you've had a conversion."

"Who knows?" he responded.

The irony of this conversation is that in the midst of evaluating the class we are achieving the very goals which the course supposedly missed. In this case, we did indeed talk about conversion and reflect on personal experience.

This is just one of dozens of conversations that have occurred around Central Church in the last two years. These have occurred because I, the pastor of that congregation, have been doing doctoral work in conversion. I have been talking about conversion, planning the class, explaining the class, conducting the class, and evaluating the class for this entire period. In this process, both by design and unavoidably, congregants have participated. They have puzzled with one another at coffee hour and in the rest rooms over what the class was driving at and how they felt it was

going. They have softly offered their frank critique of the class's failings out of the teacher's earshot. Others have come to me with deeper revelations about experiences that seemed too tender and precious to share during the sessions. Such unofficial conversations--the implicit curriculum--in my experience are often the richest part of any learning experience.

I mention this at this chapter's outset to acknowledge the depth and complexity of what has been going on at Central Church around the issues of conversion and personal spiritual experiences. Conversion as a topic of conversation has very much entered and become woven into the fabric of our common life. And the richness and complexity of this teaching-learning experience will never fully be quantified or understood.

The Plan of This Chapter

This chapter, nevertheless, aims to characterize what this project has come to mean for the congregation and myself as the teacher. Because our objectives are not readily measurable, I've relied on the participants themselves to reveal and describe their learning and the course's outcomes. I've collected data through 1) the video camera which was running through all twelve hours of class time; 2) the final class period's structured discussion; 3) a brief questionnaire distributed in the eighth class; and 4) follow-

up conversations in which I asked most of the participants to describe their experience of the class.

I will begin this evaluation by considering in turn each of the course's four goals. Using evidence judiciously gleaned from the videotape, final class, questionnaires, and follow-up conversations, I will determine how we fared in meeting our goals.

From this I will suggest areas where my course design might be improved together with techniques to achieve this improvement. This I will follow with a brief characterization of the quality of my teaching in the pilot course. And I will conclude with personal reflections on this entire experience.

II. THE GOALS

Goal One
> The course intends for class members to acquire a vocabulary and sense of confidence with which to become conversant about conversion and religious experience in general.

In the early chapters of this report I identified the ability to speak about conversion as a rare commodity in Presbyterian congregations. I went on to give reasons why such talk is stifled in our churches. I then designed a class which concentrated attention on the speaking side of the speaking-hearing duality. We worked for example on

defining *conversion*.   I considered the guests and myself as models who possessed a vocabulary and openness about religious experience, especially conversion.   My objective was to coax the learners to begin to express themselves.

In the actual experience of the pilot class participants seemed much more comfortable than I anticipated.   They talked about conversion and even their own inner experiences with relative ease.   This was evident even in the first class. During that first session, the group generated a lengthy list of aspects of conversions.   Their expressions such as "hole-in-my-heart," "wake-up call," and "hit-ya" were inventive ways to express ideas which we dealt with throughout the course.   Conventional theological vocabulary flowed in our discussions more plentifully in the latter classes as evidenced by the facets list.   In later class sessions the group more readily used expressions like "predestination," "indwelling of the Holy Spirit," and "commissioning."

Also evident in the group was a readiness to share personal religious experiences, even in the early sessions. The personal sharing element of this project began in the third class.   As we began to speak about personal experiences I detected no reluctance or embarrassment.   In each subsequent class, the members spoke of personal experiences with ease.

Further, the questionnaire responses revealed that the

learners were talking with others about conversion or other religious experiences in the days between classes. Nine of twelve respondents had engaged in such conversations. One respondent indicated that he or she[137] had spoken with a friend from the Church of God about the subject. All but two questionnaires indicated that the class atmosphere was "very conducive" to learning and discussing. The two found the experience "somewhat conducive."

This is not to suggest that all class members were totally transparent with intimate information. In the eighth class when I asked participants to share what God was doing in their lives through the class, several participants indicated that this was a "scary question." Further, one participant--the woman who had undergone a momentous religious experience in early adulthood--told me that she was not ready to share her experience with anyone, even the pastor.

Despite this limit to our intimacy, I did not find the reluctance that I predicted in this report's first chapter. My expectation was:

> ...If Presbyterians--I'm thinking of ordinary laypeople engaged in Christian community--could be coaxed into sharing with one another the personal stories of their own encounters with God, that this exercise alone would be energizing and transforming. Such an effort would re-introduce the language of encounter into the fellowship. It is likely that several barriers to this kind of intimacy would emerge. Presbyterian congregants

> may be reluctant to commit themselves to
> participate because they would have little
> appreciation for such sharing. Understandably,
> they would probably feel shy or lack words which
> would convey their deepest convictions and inspira-
> tions. They may feel that such sharing is
> essentially un-Presbyterian. Strategies for
> overcoming these difficulties would have to be
> employed in order to make such conversation pos-
> sible.[138]

This is clearly an over-statement given what we've learned from the pilot class.

Though I didn't find the predicted reluctance to speak, I did discover that the participants found this course to be an opportunity to do so. Most significantly, they hadn't *heard* from one another about spiritual experience. When the group actually started sharing and discovering what each other had experienced, most were surprised, relieved, and re-freshed. Every other insight generated by this project pales in comparison with this one. In enabling the participants to *hear* one another rather than equipping them to *speak*, this project opened a floodgate of new understandings. Every class member with whom I talked after the course was affected by what he or she discovered in the others' experiences. One woman's comments are typical:

> My experience was more similar to others than I
> expected. I felt less alone...closer to and more
> able to talk with the people in the group.

Another said:

> [The class was] reassuring. I learned that some people have a major experience and others don't need that. Before, I felt you did have to have a major experience. My Baptist friends made me feel as if I were not a Christian. It was helpful to hear what others had to say.

Another said:

> It gave me a sense of commonality with the other people...I got a sense that God had worked on these people in addition to me.

My strong sense in talking with learners several months after the course was, in some respects, comparable to that of support group participants. I had brought them together as if to break a silence which we scarcely knew existed. But once we began talking, virtually all participants felt relief that others' experiences were comparable to their own.

Goal Two

> The course intends for class members to be extending, correcting, and enriching their own understanding of conversion and religious life-orienting experiences.

There is ample evidence that we achieved this objective to some degree with most, if not all, participants. In the second class period, for example, the group did a satisfactory job of shining the light of their new exegetical understandings on their working list of conversion's elements. Further, the simple fact that each successive class period

produced additional facets for the list demonstrates that the group was extending its idea of what conversion entailed.

By the time of the final class at least some of the members were demonstrating a good grasp of the ideas which we had worked on throughout the course. For instance, one of the participants who had missed several sessions asked if we had determined what "born again" meant. Someone quickly supplied the information that "birth from above" was entailed. In the same class period as we considered how we might respond to Gladys, one woman confidently asserted that

> ...you need to talk with people who worry about not having the right experience. You need to see if other transforming experiences might be an unrecognized conversion.

Both of these remarks evidence development in people's concept of conversion.

The phone conversations also revealed that the project helped develop student's idea of conversion as a concept. One man told me:

> ...Before, I thought it was something that happened all at once. Some of our studies revealed that it isn't necessarily that way.

A woman commented that the course:

> reaffirmed for me that conversion isn't going to fit into a tight Baptist mold of a specific experience. This felt more God-like to me. In other words, it doesn't limit God.

This is not to suggest that the class brought clarity and precision in all participants' concepts of conversion. One student in the seventh class was still struggling over the idea that commissioning was often an element in conversion:

That's where my confusion comes from. In my mind, I can't get rid of conversion as change, transformation, doing a 180^0 turn. Yet, you keep using references about commissioning and answering God's call. I guess what I want to know is whether conversion is closely tied in with answering God's call or commissioning.

Another student wrote on the back of his or her questionnaire:

It would be helpful to have an overall diagram/chart or whatever that shows the commonalities of the biblical conversion experiences--add to the chart each week as we discussed them.

The second course goal calls for students to be engaged in a process of enriching their idea of conversion. Strictly speaking, this is not very demanding. It would be much more exacting to ask the *degree* to which participants understanding of conversion developed. On this point my evidence is scanty. I think it safe to say that most participants came to recognize that rigid or stereotypical views of conversion fail to embrace the depth and multiplicity of this concept. The man who told the story of the minister in the graveyard expressed in winsome fashion

what most students were understanding, namely that one person's experience cannot become normative for everyone.

In the final class, when I asked the students how their idea of conversion changed during the course, the answers seemed mostly concerned with what conversion was not. The respondents, especially those who had not undergone dramatic transforming spiritual experiences, felt more comfortable with the conversion idea because it was no longer narrow enough to exclude their own experience.

On the back of one questionnaire a person wrote:

I appreciate having my eyes opened about conversion; the idea of a massive "born again" experience was, to my mind, almost repugnant.

This kind of comment was echoed repeatedly throughout the course and in my subsequent conversations with participants. The project clearly had the effect of loosening people from the grip of the notion that conversion is a one-time, dramatic, threshold experience. Put differently, many students showed that they were understanding what conversion is not, or more accurately, what conversion is not always.

The degree to which class members were able to add positive elements to their operative idea of conversion is difficult to determine. A wide variety of facets were discussed at some point during the twelve hour course. The precise degree to which people were picking these up and

incorporating them will never be fully known. What is clear to me through the data we've reviewed is that a fair degree of development in the learners' functioning notions of conversion was evident.

<u>Goal Three</u>

> The course intends for class members to remember and re-evaluate their own religious experiences in light of new information arising from the class's Scripture study, group discussion, and independent homework reading.

Without question, students were remembering and sharing personal experiences. By the third session this was fully operative. One early instance of this was the woman who prompted me to take the quick poll of participants to determine who had been reared in the church. After this, she shares about her rigidly religious grandfather and her participation in various church-sponsored youth programs. Then she asks, "I wonder if I was looking for something?" This comment in the context of a Bible study on the Call of the Fishers is clearly an example of the remembering and reflection I was trying to stimulate.

Such evidence of remembering and reassessing crops up in most class sessions. I'm thinking of the mother who prayed about having a third child; the man who recalled a "mountain-top experience" at the time of his baptism at 21; and several others.

That members were remembering and reassessing their experiences was indicated by the fact that one woman concluded that a significant religious experience in her own background was not a conversion. Several others, such as the lady called to become a psychologist, were pondering the possibility that "conversion" might be a way to describe their transformation.

Finally, in the phone conversations, two respondents felt that the class had no influence on how they assessed their own background. Three others, however, did. During one of these conversations, a participant shared details of a devastating automobile accident which marked a turning point for her family when she was thirteen. She had not shared this story in class, and didn't actually call it a "conversion." These five were the only ones in the phone interviews, who answered this question.

Without question, the participants were reflecting on their own religious experiences and turning points.

Goal Four

> The course intends for class members to experience
> God's presence and transformation in the class
> gathering.

All but two of the respondents to the phone follow-up found the class "spiritually significant." One woman wished it could have continued. Another said it was "reassuring"

and "put a lot of things in perspective." Yet another felt
that "conversion seemed closer or more real." Another man
said, "I'm wondering more about my purpose. The class fits
into this."

The questionnaires failed to ask a direct question
concerning the participants' experience of God's presence and
transformation *via* the class. However, three participants
wrote extensive comments in conjunction with the question-
naire. In these were clues about any transforming encounter
with God. One man, an earnest and often skeptical
participant in our adult education program, wrote:

> My feeling as the class ended was one of emptiness,
> but I do not know why. I learned that conversion
> is an individual thing for each person, and for as
> many people as there are, there will be that many
> experiences. I just feel that something was
> missing from the class. I enjoyed the class and,
> with all the group interchanges, I did gain from
> it.

In another letter an equally earnest learner offered these
thoughts:

> This class was most beneficial to me. (I only wish
> I had experienced this much earlier in my life.)
> One of the greatest difficulties for me (as a child
> and adult) is to be able to love and/or forgive
> myself. And ironically, because I felt God's call
> and responded to this at an early age, sometimes
> this made me feel more unworthy. The shame I would
> feel from being a failure--failing to be good,
> pure, perfect would estrange me from [God's] love.
>
> The concept "born again" meant to me (Baptist

background) that if I felt estranged I had "lost it" or maybe was lost, so I had a lot of confusion concerning the conversion concept. Intellectually, and deep within me, I knew there was a loving God. I felt this love; I received healing; I even had Jesus come to me saying that I would not die when I was very ill. Yet, old tapes from home and church kept me fearful and somewhat separated from God. Of course, I could have read more, talked more--not that I didn't do a lot of seeking...just not quite enough for inner peace. Somehow there have been enough pulls to keep me sitting on the fence.

Conversion means to me: turning to God, by asking for forgiveness and asking or expressing a desire to be part of [God's] Kingdom. It also means being open to [God's] call; his presence; and receiving joy, and receiving life--aliveness to [God's] outer world and the inner world (my spirit) which is from God. This experience of "knowing" from where I came can happen again and again. (The experience is unique yet similar it seems to all of us.) It is a response (free will) on the part of humans to the call or spirit of God.

In all fairness to Baptists and other fundamentalist churches, the invitation of "coming to God" is valid. But other harsh doctrines somehow muddled my thinking, and from observing others, often prevent happiness and closeness to God by stressing our sinfulness and unworthiness. God is love has not been stressed accurately!

Thanks for this class!

This letter's tone typifies many people's experiences of the class. Again and again in the evaluation process I heard the words, "reassuring," "comforting," and "reaffirming." Several participants found in the course permission to accept their own experiences and feelings. Said one person about conversion during the last class:

> For me it's okay to be individual. If you don't accept who you are as being different from someone else, you can't be fully yourself. It also helps me to accept others in their differences. In the past I would compare myself to someone else whose life served as a template for my own.

In the final evaluative class session, several students reflected unforeseen experiences which seemed transforming. One woman felt more keenly the reality of her own commissioning. Another had come to realize that she can't do everything that she sees others doing. She no longer felt pressured to do things that were not comfortable--like teaching Sunday School.

As I've mentioned, I was struck by the learners' dramatic reaction to being enabled to hear the varieties of one another's experiences. A second striking impression that I've gotten as I've reviewed the results of this project is the relief which so many participants felt as they discovered the value and importance of their own spiritual experiences. I'm wondering if Gladys' distress was an overt version of what most participants brought to the class, namely a vague uneasiness about what might be lacking in their own spiritual life and an ignorance over what others had undergone. The class, I believe, conveyed a grace which touched both the anxiety and the isolation. From this sense of the operation of God's grace, I conclude that the class indeed was an occasion for participants to experience God's presence and

transformation.

III.   OTHER EVALUATIVE OBSERVATIONS

The Bible Study

Clearly, the group discussion element of this project was the most prominent and transforming aspect of the experience for the participants. What then was the significance of the exegetical work and our efforts to develop a full and nuanced description or definition of conversion?

The questionnaires revealed that ten of the twelve respondents found the Bible study "very helpful" in aiding their understanding of conversion. One participant found it "somewhat helpful." One didn't answer that question. Seven respondents, moreover, said they read--or usually read--the Bible passage before each session. These questionnaire responses assure me that the Bible study was germane to the entire experience and not an intellectual exercise detached from the learning in the group interaction.

As I reviewed the videotapes and the descriptions of each class, it was clear that by the end of most sessions the exegetical insights were not explicitly controlling the conversation. We, in other words, were not talking about the fishers, Paul, or Moses.

Nevertheless, I believe that the biblical material was in fact exerting some influence. For example, after our study of Cornelius, which emphasized how unique and situation specific God's transformation can be, the group spent much time discussing revival meetings--situations which stereotype conversion. The unusual circumstances in this text were more like a photographic negative of what we discussed, which is to say that the text did indeed enlighten the conversation. Following the study of Moses' call, most of the group interaction dwelt on the learners' sense of their own callings to various vocations. I conclude from the foregoing that the Bible study element of the classes was of significance to the overall experience and that much of its influence on the group interaction was subtle.

The Group Definition of *Conversion*

As for the group's work on cultivating *conversion's* definition or description, neither the questionnaire nor follow-up conversations revealed the participants' assessment of this exercise. As I've said, there is clear evidence that the participants indeed were extending and enriching their operational idea of conversion. But this was a result of the entire class experience. The degree to which the facets list and the "who, when, where, why, and how" questions helped us is difficult to assess.

There's no question that these exercises were awkward and never produced a final product. The facets list seemed quite effective as a means of capturing ideas in the first class. Then, in the second session it was helpful to modify the initial list in light of our exegesis. After this, our adjustments to the adjusted list threatened to cancel or conceal what we had done the week before. When I felt that the facets list exercise was becoming tedious and confusing, I tried the "who, when, where, why, and how" questions.

I noticed as I watched the videotapes that it was during the group work on definition that I often worked variations on the lesson plan. In the third class, for instance, I gave up trying to write down all the ideas that were being expressed. In this class several students questioned the point of the facets exercise, and I used their questions as an occasion to explain what I believed about some of the complexities of defining conversion. As we began working on the "who, when, where..." questions in the fifth class, I permitted the group to pursue a stimulating conversation about baptism. Minutes later, we digressed with a question concerning the amount of understanding of the faith necessary for the Christian life. Similar digressions fill this middle segment of the sixth class. It was during the middle section of the sixth class that I read the snippet out of Bill Bright's booklet.

I don't wish to suggest that the group definition work of the classes was a failure or didn't contribute to the course's overall success in reaching its objectives. Rather, this segment proved to be fertile ground for several rich conversations and "teachable moments." Perhaps in this very awkwardness and lack of closure, our work at describing conversion and listing its various facets was oddly successful.

IV. CHANGE IN THE CURRICULUM

The pilot class proved so satisfactory in meeting its goals that I intend not to change the basic structure of the lesson plans in preparation for any second presentation of the course. I would like to experiment with several minor changes as follows.

The Guests

This element of the project was one of the richest parts of the entire experience. Every comment I received underscored my own impression that the guests' presence and sharing was deeply appreciated. I'm wondering if the guests' continued participation in the class might have extended the energy they brought to the first session. By not planning to include them through the bulk of the sessions we may have

implicitly suggested that these outsiders were exhibits to be analyzed rather than fellow disciples who, like all of us, had unique encounters with God.

Further, by not studying and sharing in a slightly more ecumenical group (that is, with the outside guests present) we may have lost the variety of witness that was at the heart of the course's assumptions about conversion.

Limited Employment of Small Group Process

A second area for experimentation would entail subdividing the large group to work on various exercises designed to revise and extend our operative definition of conversion. Our work with the facets lists seemed productive through the first three classes. Perhaps in the fourth session, I could have organized the class into groups of four for the purpose of comparing the exegesis with our facets list. The who, when, where, why, and how might have been better addressed in small groups which spent a half hour together, drew up a picture or description of conversion, and shared it with the entire group upon re-gathering. Our use of the Bill Bright quote might be the germ of a much more extensive exercise in which groups took a variety of definitions of conversion and evaluated them in the light of our discoveries together.

Two or three small group exercises scheduled in the fifth, sixth, or seventh classes would be sufficient to

enliven the course and provide more involvement by partici-
pants.

I would also suggest that small group work not be
attempted for the exegetical or personal sharing portions of
the class. Assigning the Bible Study to groups would disrupt
the basic model of the class. Further, permitting the
personal sharing to be conducted in small groups would
greatly decrease the number of personal stories heard by all
class members.

<p align="center">V. THE QUALITY OF TEACHING</p>

Evaluation of the outcomes achieved--which has consumed
this chapter so far--needs to be supplemented by some kind of
assessment of the quality of the teaching. Elliot Eisner has
asserted that worthy content presented in an excellent
curriculum can be rendered confusing and inconsequential by
poor teaching.[139] Teaching, in other words, is a vital link
in the process of providing students with beneficial
experience.

Eisner goes on to assert that,

It is clear that scientific evidence about teaching
or about most other aspects of educational practice
is quite limited. There is little in the way of
hard data that can be used to justify educational
practices.[140]

In claiming that rigid measurement is of limited value

in assessing teaching, Eisner is inviting educators to find other means of uncovering the richness of an educational program. This section will attempt just this with respect to my role as teacher of "Conversion in Retrospect."

As with my discussion of the course goals at the beginning of this chapter, I will base my comments on my review of the class videotapes, the questionnaires, and follow-up phone conversations.

While I have taught Bible study classes, organized adult educational events, and led small groups for nearly twenty years, I have never before invested the degree of reflection and preparation as I have for this project. This, in turn, has provided me with a fresh perspective on myself as adult educator in the Community of Faith. My interest in adult development has deepened considerably as has my enthusiasm for what is possible and necessary in adult Christian education.

This section will take in turn my work in three areas of teacher functioning: preparing, lecturing, and leading discussions. I will try to characterize briefly the quality of my work in each.

Preparing

My most important discovery about preparing an adult classroom learning experience is that the class design takes

the same shape as the teacher's knowledge of the subject. In this case, "Conversion in Retrospect" is a capsule of my learnings about conversion over the last three years. My own prior wrestling with the dearth of conventional conversion language in the Bible coupled with my discovery of the emic-etic concepts contributed greatly to the classroom methodology of establishing a description of conversion before appealing to the Scriptures for correction and enrichment.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's work plus my study of conversion in history and theology further taught me that *conversion's* meaning, while always revolving around a family of resemblances, is also quite fluid and situation-specific. What Christians throughout the Church's experience have included under the umbrella of conversion is remarkable. The historical and theological phase of my study suggested to me that people may have transforming experiences which they don't identify as conversions. This would be especially true where a rigid or stereotyped notion of conversion commands what people include in the idea. With this insight came the thought that perhaps my own parishioners had undergone experiences which compared to those of biblical characters, but discounted them because they didn't conform to a prevailing idea of conversion.

The final phase of my personal evolution in

understanding conversion came in reading C. Ellis Nelson's, How Faith Matures.[141] He asserts that faith matures with encounters with God and the sharing of such encounters in the context of the believing community. When such experience is shared it comes to be a vitalizing gift to the community. This insight lies behind the final group-interaction portion of the class.   Each major element in the class design, then, developed in accordance with my discoveries about conversion. In turn, curriculum design seems intimately wed to my personal exploration of the topic. In the case of this project, my long supervised work on conversion was unusually lavish. And the resulting curriculum proved effective.

This gives important clues for how I can prepare for future adult classes. Reading and reflection far in advance of the actual teaching of a course are probably more than just good work habits. Leisurely reflection on and study of a topic leads naturally to the model of teaching and various classroom activities. The art of paying attention to how I, as the teacher, learn is a valuable point of departure for guiding others in their learning. Indeed, this linkage between the teacher's learning and curriculum development is so significant in my thinking that I am at present inviting adults in one course at our church to develop the curriculum for their own class.

The course, "Conversion in Retrospect" benefitted from

other forms of preparation. I tried to anticipate and minimize unproductive class time as much as possible. I did this by planning in advance for furniture arranging, handout distribution, and coffee service. More significantly, I created handouts which insured that everybody had either the correct biblical translation, the current list of facets, and the last session's discussion questions.

I was particularly pleased with the way in which the handouts displaying structure worked to minimize the need for me to explain concepts such as chiastic text structure, divisions in the narrative, and the like.

I would also include under preparation, my informal reflection on each session between classes. This enabled me to be more conscious of how well we were meeting our objectives and to adjust my approach or time allocation accordingly.

The result of these various forms of preparation was a class which was well supported by my outside work. Not only was the basic concept well-conceived, but time-wasting problems were mostly eliminated. This project has been the first occasion when I have experienced the benefits of thorough preparation. Because the class seemed to be so successful, my appreciation of preparation is greatly increased.

Lecturing

As I reviewed the videotapes observing aspects of my style as I led the Bible study portion of the classes, it strikes me that my lecturing style is an extension of my pastoral style and personality in general. I am passionate about ideas and ideals. My lecture style reflects this. My presence in the classroom invites students to engage with me in exploring the text's richness and subtlety. We move together as if on a treasure hunt. I guide, pointing out clues and asking students if they are noticing such things as symbols, allusions, structural features, and the like.

My tone when in front of a class is much more cerebral than emotional. As I observed my lecture style I also observed the class for signs of boredom or disengagement. I did not find any either on the tapes or in my experience of actually teaching. All students in camera view, followed the thread of my remarks carefully and studied the handouts during my remarks. Further, the students' remarks indicated that they were quite engaged.

My love of words in their connection with ideas also shows up in my speech. Even in front of a group, my sentences are often complex and vocabulary sprinkled with exegetical jargon. For example, my notes for these classes contained summary statements or precise sentences which expressed my ideas. Sometimes I would read these. Curiously, my moves from speaking extemporaneously to reading

important ideas was so seamless that I--viewing the videotape--often couldn't tell when I was reading. This, in my mind, says a great deal about my lecture style.

The dominant intellectual tone of my lecturing is modulated by several other elements in my style. Most notably I make frequent comical remarks which are rooted in the content of the teaching. All of the classes were well-sprinkled with group laughter which elevated the energy level.

Further, my hands are active when I speak, but other body movement is subdued. I stay parked behind the lectern or at the news print. During discussion I might lean on the podium or news print stand, often holding a cup of coffee. These behaviors are doubtless responsible for the overall tone of classroom casualness.

My lecture style would benefit from the same kind of development that would improve my pastoral style in general. If I would work to feel my own emotional response to the subject under study and then make that feeling more available in my speaking, I believe that I could engage students on an affective as well as intellectual level.

Discussion Leadership

This is the art of allowing students to teach one another through their remarks and questions. The discussion

leader needs to attend not so much to the content or direction of the learning, but the classroom climate which invites and honors sharing. In my class, I scheduled a half hour in which I attempted to impart several specific insights into the text under study. My task shifted when, in the second thirty minutes, I asked the class to modify their description of conversion, and then again in the final thirty minutes when I invited the participants to share out of their own experience. In short, discussion leadership was a crucial part of my functioning.

I was pleased with my functioning in this role. As we have seen, the project's most significant outcome resulted from the discussion. For my part, I facilitated the discussion from the podium. I would ask a discussion or sharing question of the class and receive responses. Most remarks and questions were addressed to me but intended to be heard by the entire group. There was only a small degree of dialogue between group participants. My typical reaction to a student remark was first to listen--sometimes for several minutes. I would then respond by summarizing: "so, you see yourself as undergoing a conversion right now." After the student would confirm or clarify, I would frequently ask a follow-up question: "How long has this been going on?" The follow-up question functioned to lift up issues for everyone's contemplation. I had not realized before

reviewing the videotapes that my interaction with students who were sharing provided much playfulness with the ideas we were exploring. I was also pleased by my inventiveness in responding to student contributions. For example, when one woman wondered aloud what percentage of people were reared in a church, I simply took a quick poll of those present. In short, my discussion leadership extended the students' contributions by raising helpful questions.

Finally, I noticed that I often praised the learners to let them know that I admired their comments. After even the most straight forward answer to a simple question I would say, "good." I praised more lavishly comments which were particularly insightful.

My attempt in all of this was to encourage discussion by receiving it appreciatively and to stretch its value by asking engaging questions. This, I'm guessing, explains why class members never exhausted their willingness to disclose more and more out of their store of spiritual experience.

VI. FINAL WORD

At the conclusion of John Calvin's extensive section in his <u>Institutes</u> on the Holy Catholic Church (Book IV), he advances an argument against monasticism. Part of his polemic, which sounds shrill in modern ears, is that medieval religious orders separated from the Church.

> ...All those who enter into the monastic community
> break with the church. Why? Do they not separate
> themselves from the lawful society of believers, in
> adopting a peculiar ministry and a private adminis-
> tration of the sacraments? If this is not to break
> the communion of the church, what is?...They have
> both excommunicated themselves from the whole body
> of the church and despised the ordinary ministry by
> which the Lord willed to preserve peace and love
> among his people.[142]

More interesting than what Calvin says about monks is what he is saying about the Church. This polemical section is one natural implication of Calvin's view of the Church as the ordinary vehicle of God's grace for God's people. In the work of its pastors and the ordering of its life the visible church is the "mother of believers."[143] Further, "while God could perfect his own, nevertheless [God] desires them to grow up into [maturity] solely under the education of the church."[144]

What is revealed in these snippets from the Institutes is a bit of the so-called "high doctrine of the Church" which threads its way through much of Reformed theology and prac-tice.

One manifestation of this Reformed emphasis were the controversies which 19th century American Presbyterians had over the burgeoning of independent mission and evangelism organizations. The cautionary voice in some quarters of the Presbyterian Church was that such organizations, being independent, were separated from the order of the ordinary

Church. Further, the very existence of such groups carried the implication that various forms of mission were extraneous to the church's essential vocation.

This kind of conversation is typical in the Reformed tradition and grows out of its high regard for the uniqueness and signal importance of the Church. If God has gathered people into the Church and has uniquely given of Godself in that communion, it is fitting to question when important elements in the Christian life--like the devotional life or evangelism--become based outside that community.

This project has done just that. We began by demonstrating the degree to which the concept of conversion has fled from the conversation of many Presbyterian congregations. Why would the experience of intensified personal change or fresh spiritual awareness which is the experience of so many disciples of Christ, be so significantly absent from preaching, study, and even personal conversations of Presbyterians in the normal course of our life together? We have offered some answers here.

We have also proposed one way that conversion and spiritual experience can re-join the normal conversation of the Church. In this case, we devised an adult classroom experience which was particularly shaped to reveal the nature of conversion and our various experiences of it. And the results of this exercise were gratifying.

This success in turn raises in my thoughts the question of how many vital elements in the Christian life have quietly departed the normal fellowship of the Christian community which could and should be recovered?

My mind runs immediately to the current interest in spiritual direction. While not yet a full-blown trend, I'm aware that some Presbyterian pastors and laypeople are seeking and benefiting from the companionship of a spiritual friend who provides suggestions and accountability for one's devotional life. I can't help but wonder about the loss to the spiritual climate of a church when its earnest, questing members are individually and anonymously cultivating their prayer life in a way which provides no engagement with fellow Christians with whom they gather for Word, Sacrament, and mission.

I would ask the same question of charitable work. In my experience, the people who know the lives and predicament of the poor are social workers. If Christ's ministry in the world is among the poor and oppressed, why is it that work among these has, to some degree, been delegated to professionals.

Something like this could be asked about theological reflection, pastoral care, and evangelism. My concern as I mention these isn't that they are pursued by people and organizations not connected with our churches, but that

congregations often have accommodated themselves to the idea that the vitality inherent in these pursuits rightfully belongs elsewhere.

This project has reminded me that conversion and witness to our encounters with God can flourish within the fellowship into which God has gathered us. God's regenerative work in converting all of us, which occasionally is dramatically intense, is not the province of some other group or theological persuasion. Our discovery of this at Central Church was a moment of grace for many of us.

How often we Presbyterians, when confronted with signs that we've lost vitality and our ability to capture the imagination of a new generation, berate ourselves for lacking passion or a contemporary message, or appealing marketing. I'm thinking that a more useful way to frame our dilemma is to ponder what God has given us which we have neglected or come to believe is outside our tradition. When we can reclaim what has always been our heritage as disciples of Christ--our experience of God, our vocation, our fellowship, our destiny--then we will find that vitality in our common life will take care of itself.

HANDOUT SHEETS

THE CALL OF THE FISHERS
Mark 1.14-20
Context

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

I

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

> Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who
> shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in
> the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make
> his paths straight.

II

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a
baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there
went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people
of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river
Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with
camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and
ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After
me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose
sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have
baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the
Holy Spirit."

III

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was
baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of
the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the
Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from
heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well plea-
sed."

IV

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.
And he was in the wilderness forth days, tempted by Satan;
and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to
him.

THE CALL OF THE FISHERS
Mark 1.14-20
Structure and Content

I

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preach-
ing the gospel of God, and saying, "The time *is fulfilled* and
the kingdom of God *is at hand*; repent, and believe in the
gospel."

II
And **passing** along by the Sea of Galilee,
    he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a
    net in the sea;
        for they were **fishermen**.
          And Jesus said to them, "Follow me
        and I will make you become **fishers** of men."
    And immediately they left their **nets**
and **followed** him.

III

And **going** on a little farther,
    he saw James the son of **Zebedee** and John his brother,
    who were in their **boat** mending the nets.
    And immediately he called them;
    and they left their father **Zebedee** in the **boat** with the
    hired servants,
and **followed** him.

THE REVERSAL OF AN ENEMY
Acts 9
Structure and Content

Scene 1

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (Acts 9.1-2)

Scene 2

Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus,	so they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus.(Acts 9.3-8)
and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him.	and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing;
And he fell to the ground	Paul arose from the ground;
and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"	The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.
And he said, "Who are you, Lord?"	
And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting;	and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."

but rise

Scene 3

And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, and took food and was strengthened. (Acts 9.9-19a)

Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."

has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul;

he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came,

for behold, he is praying, and he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

And laying his hands on him

But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to thy saints at Jerusalem;

for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name."

for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

But the Lord said to him, "Go,

Scene 4

For several days he was with the disciples at Damascus. And
in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying,
"He is the Son of God." And all who heard him were amazed,
and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of
those who called on this name? And he has come here for this
purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests." But
Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the
jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the
Christ. (Acts 9.19b-22)

Scene 5

When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but
their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the
gates day and night, to kill him; but his disciples took him
by night and let him down over the wall, lowering him in a
basket. (Acts 9.23-25)

THE CONVERSION OF CORNELIUS
Acts 10.1-48
Vision Scene

Cornelius	**Peter**

Scene 1

¹At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ²a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God. ³About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." ⁴And he stared at him in terror, and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵And now send men to Joppa, and bring one Simon who is called Peter; ⁶he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." ⁷When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those that waited on him, ⁸and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

Scene 2

⁹The next day, as they were on their journey and coming near the city, Peter went up on the housetop to pray, about the sixth hour. ¹⁰And he became hungry and desired something to eat; but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹and saw the heaven opened, and something descending, like a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the earth. ¹²In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³And there came a voice to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴But Peter said, "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." ¹⁵And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." ¹⁶This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

Journey and Welcome

Scene 3

[17]Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision which he had seen might mean, behold, the men that were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood before the gate [18]and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. [19]And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. [20]Rise and go down, and accompany them without hesitation; for I have sent them." [21]And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for

Scene 4

The next day he rose and went off with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him. [24]And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his kinsmen and close friends. [25]When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. [26]But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." [27]And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered; [28]and he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean. [29]So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me."

your coming?" [22]And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house, and to hear what you have to say." [23]So he called them in to be his guests.

Proclamation

Scene 5

[30]And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was keeping the ninth hour of prayer in my house; and behold, a man stood before me in bright apparel, [31]saying, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. [32]Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging in the house of Simon a tanner, by the seaside.' [33]So I sent to you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

Scene 6

[34]And Peter opened his mouth and said, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, [35]but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. [36]You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), [37]the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: [38]how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. [39]And we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; [40]but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; [41]not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. [42]And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and

the dead. [42]To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Confirmation

Scene 7

[44]While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. [45]And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. [46]For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, [47]"Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" [48]And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

JESUS AND NICODEMUS
John 3.1-15
Content and Structure

²³Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; ²⁴but Jesus did not trust himself to them, ²⁵because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man.

I

3Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and **said to him**, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him." ³**Jesus answered him**, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

II

⁴**Nicodemus said to him**, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵**Jesus answered**, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' ⁸The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."

III

⁹**Nicodemus said to him**, "How can this be?" ¹⁰**Jesus answered him**,"Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not under-stand this? ¹¹Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not

receive our testimony. [12]If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? [13]No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man. [14]And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up. [15]that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

"THE SENDING OF MOSES"
Exodus 3.1-12

Divine Confrontation

3Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. [2]And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. [3]And moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt." [4]When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see,

Introductory Word

God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here am I." [5]Then he said, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." [6]And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God. [7]Then the Lord said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, [8]and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. [9]And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.

Commission

[10]Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt."

Objection

[11]But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?"

Reassurance

[12]He said, "But I will be with you;

Sign

and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain."

CONVERSION IN RETROSPECT
May 29, 1994

Gladys Riney was a long-time member and dear friend of many of us at Central Presbyterian Church. Several months before her death, this exchange took place during one of my routine visits to her home.

Gladys: I spend a lot of time listening to the Bible on tape and listening to Christian radio. That's really the most important part of my life these days...It was important to Ralph too. I wish I could have had the faith he did.

Doug: I don't understand.

Gladys: Well, for one thing, Ralph was born again. I don't think I've ever had that experience.

Doug: What's that like for you?

Gladys: Well sometimes I just don't feel like a real Christian...

Doug: Oh, Gladys, you're a real Christian...

Gladys: (long pause) Well, this really bothers me. So many people have had the experience of being born again. I talk with many of my friends. Several of them have had it. But I honestly can't say that its happened to me. I believe in God and in his son, Jesus. I try to be a good person. We've always gone to Church. But I just wish there were something I could do to be born again.

CONVERSION IN RETROSPECT
May 29, 1994

Tell about one way that God has been changing you through our time of study together. Jot down your ideas here. This paper will not be collected, however, you may wish to share this information aloud and/or by turning in this sheet.

EXEGETICAL LECTURE NOTES

THE FISHERS' CALL
Exegetical Notes for Mark 1.14-20
April 17, 1994

I.   Context--the most important thing to understand for our
     purposes is that the text hints in numerous ways that
     there is a decisive shift if the age of God's work with
     the coming of Jesus. Mark suggests this by contrasting
     John's ministry with that of Jesus.
     A.   It is important that we understand John the Bap-
          tist's ministry as preparatory.
          1.   Isaiah's description of the voice in the
               wilderness is preparatory.
          2.   John's clothing and lifestyle (1.6) are
               reminiscent of the prophet Elijah. John's
               ministry recalls expectations that Elijah
               would reappear before the messianic age.
          3.   John's words, "After me comes..."
          4.   Jesus' coming baptism of the Holy Spirit is
               different than John's water baptism.
          5.   John's call to repentance accompanied with a
               sign-act is familiar and picks up on the Old
               Testament prophetic idea that repentance,
               marked by a tangible act (fasting, ashes) is
               an appropriate waiting mode.
     B.   The Baptism of Jesus is a transitional section.
          1.   This section sets the stage for the coming of
               the Holy Spirit and the voice from above
               which signals that what John was waiting for
               had arrived.
     C.   The Wilderness Temptation further contrasts Jesus
          with John.
          1.   Mark, of the three Synoptic Gospels, does not
               have an extensive temptation sequence with
               the Devil.
          2.   Both John and Jesus were in the wilderness,
               but Jesus' wilderness is different.

3. The peaceable presence of wild beasts suggests that the animals--sometimes associated with demonic powers--have been restored to peaceable co-existence with humans. The timeless conflict between the children of Adam and creatures has been resolved.

4. Angels ministering to Jesus suggests that the original state of paradise had been restored.

5. Again, the suggestion here is that Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness serves as a counterpoint to Adam.

D. The Fulfillment of Time--By the time we get to verse 14 the reader is prepared to understand that something decisive has just shifted. Some new stage or epoch has been reached. There is a decisive shift with the coming of Jesus.

1. John the Baptist is arrested. He is out of the way. His era is finished.

2. "The appointed time has come to pass" This is the perfect indicative. In Mark, the Kingdom is most present of all the gospels.

3. The Kingdom of God has come. "These are the good old days." "If you blink you miss it." "Surprise, it's here." "You may already have won." "Go ahead caller, you're on the air."

E. Summary: While we haven't gotten into the actual call of the fishermen, we have learned that there has been inaugurated a decisive new phase of God's working in the world. This is signaled by important differences in the ministries of John and Jesus. Mark has in many ways been contrasting these two ministries in his text so far. One inference we can draw is that, as the leaders of the respective ages are different, so is the nature of the response to their different calls. Discipleship, including the faithful response of the fishermen in our lesson, will be something different than the response requested by John.

II. Summary Statement: Mark 1.14-15. The key to these two verses is the understanding that they function as a summary of all that follows in Mark until the chapter 11.

A. The account of Jesus' ministry which follows equates with 1.14 and 15.

B.	The gospel of Mark generally divides into two geographical sections: the Galilee ministry and the Jerusalem passion. The basic moves are from Judea to Galilee; Galilee to Judea; then Judea to Galilee. These sections are announced by summary statements. (See 1.2-3; 1.14-15; and 11.1-11).

C.	Those studying Mark will be interested to learn that Mark does this with two key parables, that of the Sower and that of the Tenants. Each parable is a pregnant story which tells the reader in subtle and symbolic form what the section which follows is "about."

D.	We learn that in Galilee, Jesus will primarily be a preacher

E.	The section is set off by an inclusio: "gospel."

F.	Jesus' message--in contrast with John's—includes faith which is the hallmark of his ministry.

G.	Summary: The most useful way that we can use these verses is to equate the call of the fishermen which follows with the summary statement. What the fishermen do in following Jesus is to respond to the new epoch, to live in the kingdom, to genuinely and authentically repent, and to believe in the gospel.

III.	The Calling of the First Disciples:

A.	This location of these brief stories, immediately following important information about Jesus (Christology), indicates the primacy and importance of discipleship.

B.	Calling disciples is the first thing Jesus does.

C.	The are likely middle class fishermen. Boat and equipment owners. They are not destitute or "simple."

D.	The image of a group of students following a teacher bears a resemblance to the rabbinical school. Mark's reader, familiar with the rabbinical schools, will realize that students choose their rabbi. Jesus disciples didn't choose their rabbi. The teacher choose them.

E.	The purpose of the expression "fishers of men" is also different from the task of learning and disseminating teaching, as was the practice in rabbinical schools. In the fishermen's case, Jesus

intrudes with a call to change occupations from fishing to reaching others.

F. The abrupt response is occasioned by the authority of Jesus' call. this is not explained.
   1. This is the time to examine the chiastic pattern and its highlighting of Jesus' command.

G. James and John not only leave nets, but also father and hired workers in the operation. Another abandonment of lifestyle.

H. This leaving of occupation is the negative aspect of discipleship. This intensifies throughout the Gospel as Jesus asks disciples to release more and more and ultimately life itself. This seems to supply us with Mark's idea of repentance.

I. Positively, they followed Jesus. This seems to corresponds with "belief."

J. What the disciples do illustrates what it means to repent and believe the gospel.

K. The threshold into Markan discipleship is not revolutionary. The disciples simply drop what they are doing and fall in behind Jesus. They don't need to understand the inbreaking of the new age and the conflict with evil that it brings. Neither do they need to grasp where their journey with Jesus will take them. All they do is take the first step.

THE DAMASCUS ROAD EXPERIENCE
Exegetical Notes for Acts   9
April 24, 1994

1.Context

Luke narrates Saul's Damascus Road experience three
times, shaping each telling to advance the aims of its
narrative context. Luke sets this first version of Saul's
experience in a section of Acts which describes the Church's
early expansion beyond Jerusalem. Conforming to the pattern
outlined in 1.8, Luke reports missionary successes in Samaria
and Gaza. These, ironically, occur in part because of
persecution (8.1) and in spite of reluctance by Christians
(9.13, 10.14). In other words, Luke wants to dramatize the
providential element in the Church's nascent worldwide
mission. Thus, Phillip is successful in Samaria even as
persecution grows. Simon can't control the Holy Spirit. And
the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch depicts the ends-of-the-
earth potential of this movement.

In this setting, Saul's conversion represents the
Gospel's power over even zealously hostile Jews. Further,
Cornelius' conversion--supposedly the first among Gentiles--
represents the inclusion of non-Jewish peoples. All the
episodes leading up to and following Saul's experience extend
Luke's theme of the miraculous success of the Gospel.

The fastest way, in classroom setting, to impart
information about the episodes leading up to and following
Saul's experience is to distribute an outline summary of the
larger narrative. Understanding this positions class members
to perceive Luke's basic strategy in this particular telling
of Saul's conversion. Luke presents this event not only as
God's overcoming of a daunting obstacle, but also in turning
this obstacle into one of the Gospel's greatest assets.
Essentially this text is about Christ's commission for Saul
to preach the Gospel which he once tried to suppress.

2.   Structure

That this conversion is about the "reversal of an

enemy"[145] becomes even more clear when readers examine the text's structure. While Luke has not shaped his narrative into a perfect or flawless structure, the story reveals evidence of careful crafting. The narrative divides into five distinct scenes. Divisions are signalled by time or geography changes. The last scene (9.23-25), represents an ironic parallel to the first (9.1-2). By the end of the story, Saul is doing precisely the opposite of what he is doing at the beginning. The actual Damascus Road scene divides into a clear chiastic pattern with the commanding word from Jesus: "...But rise" (9.6), marking both the text's and Saul's turning points. A similar pattern is discernable in Ananias' story. Again, Jesus' command, "go," (9.15) marks Ananias' transformation.

As with the contextual observations, a schematic representation of these scenes will greatly enhance student understanding. The structure of the text which places Jesus' positive commands in the center of two scenes suggests that conversion in this context is closely allied with commissioning.

It is worth noting that Luke does not dwell on any "introspective conscience"[146] which is rescued by grace. Further, the content of what Saul comes to believe about Jesus, the Gospel, or whatever in this scene is beyond the interest of the text. Rather, Saul is commissioned. The double vocative "Saul, Saul!" is reminiscent of Old Testament calls to service as a prophet. So is the use of _dei_ which we associate with prophecy fulfillment. The element of commissioning is further suggested in the revelation to Ananias, ("...He is my chosen instrument to carry my name...") and in the rapidity with which Saul commences his preaching ministry ("immediately he proclaimed Jesus").

Ananias' commission bears surprising resemblances to a conversion in itself. This reminds the reader of other instances in Acts when God has to convert the Church along with the people it reaches. Ananias mediates Saul's miraculous healing, his reception of the Holy Spirit, and (possibly) his baptism. Ananias' role in the story makes it clear that Saul's conversion is unfinished until the Christian community participates.

3. Conclusion

The exegetical portion of this class should emphasize Saul's conversion as the Gospel's overcoming and recruitment of an ardent enemy. Beverly Gaventa has pointed out how Saul's strength or power rises and falls throughout the story. At first, Saul is empowered to persecute. Then he is disabled and left unable even to function. Finally, he is empowered again in the service of the Gospel which he formally sought to destroy.

CORNELIUS AND PETER
Exegetical Notes for Acts 10
May 1, 1994

1.Context

As the story of Acts unfolds, the advance of the Gospel overcomes a variety of barriers, first from the Jewish community, then from Jews within the Christian community, and ultimately from Gentiles. The transforming work of the Holy Spirit overcomes these obstacles in succession, first by reversing Saul's persecution and, by the eleventh chapter, overcoming Jewish-Christian resistance to welcoming Gentiles into Christian fellowship. Cornelius' conversion is the decisive story of God's defeat of this particular barrier. It follows stories of successful missionizing among Jews and precedes the outbreak of persecution by Gentiles.

B.   Structure:

Unlike the first two studies, I have adopted Beverly Gaventa's scene divisions without modification. These are:

Scene I	10.1-8
Scene II	10.9-16
Scene III	10.17-23a
Scene IV	10.23b-29
Scene V	10.30-33
Scene VI	10.34-43
Scene VII	10.44-48
Scene VIII	11.1-18[147]

The first two scenes parallel each other in that they are both revelations, one to Cornelius and one to Peter. This establishes a pattern in which the narrative's focus alternates between Peter and Cornelius. This in turn awakens the reader to the insight that both Cornelius and Peter are undergoing transformation. For this reason it would be helpful for students to have sheets which present the scenes in discrete blocks of text which are numbered.

C.   Comment

Scene I

In reviewing this portion of the text, the class should notice Cornelius' status as one outside Israel's covenant. As a soldier he could not observe the Torah.   Cornelius, however, is a devout man.   His reception of the angel's message bears a hint of Mary's receptivity and consent to Gabriel's annunciation.

The details of Peter's host--Simon the Tanner--are the first in a series of references to houses and hospitality which thread their way through all eight scenes in this story.   Hospitality is close to the essence of what Cornelius' conversion is about.

Scene II

Peter's vision is in some ways comparable to that of Cornelius.   Peter's resistance and misunderstanding is faintly reminiscent of Zechariah's resistance to the angel in the Temple.   This evokes a familiar biblical theme where those inside the faith community display more doubt, misunderstanding, or resistance than some outside. Also, the theme of clean and unclean animals relates to a deeper theme in this portion of Acts, namely the Church's dawning realization of the abrogation of Jewish purity laws.

Scene III

The revelation to Peter continues in this scene not through another vision, but through the timely (providential) arrival of Cornelius' messengers accompanied by the Spirit's command to Peter.   It is worth noting at this point that obedience to specific commands is often an element in Lukan conversions.   Students should notice also that Peter becomes the host of the messengers at the scene's end.

Scene IV

Two elements in this scene require comment.   First, Cornelius falls to Peter's feet, an act of obeisance reminiscent of Peter's initial response to Jesus (Luke 5.8).   Also, Luke mentions Peter's entrance into Cornelius' house twice.

Again, the accent is on hospitality.

Scene V

This is Cornelius' recapitulation of his vision in Scene
I. The act of a Gentile sharing with Jews stories of revela-
tions--especially when they resemble revelations familiar to
Jewish Christians (Luke 24.4 and Acts 1.10)--brings the
reader to the heart of the author's aim in these eight
scenes. The Jewish Christian Church is discovering that
Gentiles have had experiences with God that compare with
their own. The continual rehearsal of revelation stories,
(10.22, 10.28, 10.30-32, 10.34-43, 11.4-17), which may strike
the reader as tiresome or repetitious, in fact is what brings
about the transformation of all parties. Upon hearing Cor-
nelius' testimony, Peter's attitude towards Gentiles is
transformed: "Truly I perceive that God shows no
partiality..." (10.34). Something similar happens later when
the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentile hearers of Peter's
preaching. Says Peter, "Can anyone forbid..." These words
ironically echo the Eunuch's question in a previous chapter.
However, in that story, the Eunuch was the convert rather
than the representative of the Church. The culmination of
this theme is played out in Jerusalem when Peter recites the
whole story (11.1-18).
Scene VI

As for Cornelius, he and his household is transformed at
the hearing of Peter's witness (11.34ff). The material in
Peter's speech is, by this time, familiar to the reader of
Acts and constitutes a typical recital of the course of
Jesus' ministry. Gaventa cites evidence that this recital
has been tailored in minor ways to accent the fact that the
Gospel is for all peoples.[148]

Scenes VII

The arrival of the Holy Spirit, interrupting Peter's
speech is the decisive moment of transformation both for Cor-
nelius and company, and, as the reader will later learn, for
the Jewish Christian community as well (11.17-18).

Taken in its entirety, this lengthy narrative holds much
promise for our adult class. For instance, many of the usual
elements associated with Christian conversions are not

present in this story. Cornelius does not seem to change
religions or acknowledge a new doctrine. Neither does he re-
nounce a former life of sin or receive a call to new
vocation.   (Curiously, Peter's transformation does entail
some of these elements.) What is new for Cornelius in this
episode is the experience of fellowship with the Church, the
hearing of the Word from a representative of the Church, a
filling with the Holy Spirit, and water baptism administered
by a representative of the Church. Experiencing the welcome
of the community is close to the essence here.

Paralleling this is Cornelius' invitation for Peter to
remain as a guest for several days. As the church embraces
peoples beyond the orbit of Judaism, so does Cornelius
embrace Peter as a guest in his house. Says Gaventa about
verse 48b:

> Consistent with the entire narrative, this request
> suggests that the inclusion of Gentiles does not
> have to do merely with a grudging admission to the
> circle of the baptized. Including Gentiles means
> receiving them, entering their homes, and accepting
> hospitality in those homes.[149]

JESUS AND NICODEMUS
Exegetical Notes for John 3.1-15
May 8, 1994

1.Context

This conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus takes place early in John's Gospel in a section which describes various peoples' responses to Jesus. Our text is preceded by the wedding in Cana where Jesus' disciples come to believe more intensely in Jesus. Following the Cana incident, Jesus cleanses the Jerusalem Temple, an act which is condemned by some and the basis for deeper faith by others. John then summarizes the varieties of people's reactions to Jesus in the three verses which introduce the Nicodemus conversation. Some people, to paraphrase, believe in Jesus because he performs signs. However, because this is not an adequate response. Jesus does not believe (*pisteuein*) in the people. It is against this backdrop of mistrust and inadequate faith in Jesus that John presents the Nicodemus dialogue.

This context helps us understand the significance of verse 2. Nicodemus has formed his opinion about Jesus on the basis of the signs--a dubious situation. Add to this the observation that the reader never learns whether Nicodemus has come to adequate faith. Twice after this conversation John inserts Nicodemus into the narrative (John 7.42-52; 19.38-39) in such a way which leaves the reader curious whether Nicodemus is a genuine disciple or not. Given all of this, it is likely that John is using this dialogue to invite low commitment types into a deeper response to Jesus. The nature of this deeper response emerges in the conversation.

B.   Structure

Raymond Brown has made a convincing case for a three-fold organization of this narrative.[150] Each section begins with a question by Nicodemus and concludes with an answer from Jesus. These answers begin with the repeated phrase, "Jesus answered..." As to Nicodemus' opening remark which is not technically a question, it seems that Jesus perceives

this as an implicit query.

Each of the three structural sections also correspond to a person of the Trinity. The first section makes reverence to God the Father (1-3). The second deals with the Holy Spirit (4-8). And the final section (9-21) focuses on God the Son. From this we can infer a movement in the text whereby a person comes into the Kingdom of God through the mysterious agency of the Spirit which leads him or her to a believing relationship with Jesus.

C.   Selected Content

Several terms or concepts in this lesson require explanation in order for students to understand what John is saying about the entry into adequate response to Jesus.

1.   *gennethe anothen* (Born again; born from above)
John uses this phrase's double meaning to create misunderstanding in Nicodemus and the consequent need for Jesus to deepen his explanation. This misunderstanding motif is a teaching device and is commonplace in this gospel. In this case, Nicodemus initially hears "born again." Jesus means "born from above" which entails the Holy Spirit. Implicit in being born from above is God's initiative. Coupled with the mysterious existence, source, and activity of the wind (Spirit), being born from above makes it clear that God is the essential actor in the new birth.

2.   Water
This lonely allusion to baptism injects a communal element into this text. Baptism is preeminently a community event and thus, in this setting, prevents the reader from privatizing the "born from above" experience. A more subtle communal element in this lesson is John's use of the plural second person pronoun (you) in verses 7, 11, and 12.

3.   Wind
A double entendre is at work in John's use of the word, *pneuma*, which may be translated either "wind" or "spirit." To the ancients, the occurrence of wind--coming from different directions with various forces--must certainly have been a mysterious, uncontrollable experience. The movement of the Spirit, which brings the birthing from above, is likewise beyond the person's initiative or understanding.

Thus, the new birth is grounded entirely in divine initiative.

4. Conclusion

John's Gospel never tells the reader whether Nicodemus comes to full or adequate faith in Jesus. This, however, does not detract from what this text teaches about the new birth. The image of birthing--whether for a second time or from above--is a powerful image of the depth of discontinuity from one's past. The wind/spirit image underscores the divine initiative which brings to reality this birth. Finally, the discussion about belief in Jesus makes it clear that the specific action required of the believer is attachment to Christ. This, in turn, constitutes the new birth which is the meaning of "seeing" the Kingdom of God.

THE SENDING OF MOSES
Exegetical Notes for Exodus 3.1-12
May 15, 1994

1.Context

The sending of Moses is thoroughly intertwined with the
situation of Israel's slavery and deliverance. In the two
chapters which precede the Burning Bush Theophany, the text
symbolically identifies Moses not only with Israel but also
with YHWH. For instance, Moses' rescue from his hiding place
among the reeds of the Nile anticipates numerous water-
related deliverances in Exodus--preeminently at the Re(e)d
Sea. Likewise, Moses' conflict with the Egyptians (2.12);
his being subject to the Pharaoh's edict (2.15); his flight
to the wilderness (2.15b); his encounter with God at Sinai
(3.2ff); and his concern for justice in the faith community
(2.13); all foreshadow Israel's coming experiences.

Similarly, Moses' actions echo those of God. Like God,
Moses sees Israel's oppression (2.11); strikes an Egyptian in
response (2.12); and saves the oppressed in the wilderness
(2.17b). The effect of these symbols of Moses' identi-
fication with both YHWH and Israel is to suggest that he is--
in some hidden way--the locus of the encounter between God
and people.

Moses' encounter with YHWH at the burning bush marks the
occasion when Moses becomes who he has always been--a leader,
liberator, and lawgiver. The theophany and sending work to
actualize and make effective Moses' calling. Moses' return
to Egypt at YHWH's behest and in YHWH's company functions to
allow Moses to bear fruit in grand ways where he had failed
miserably on his own.

Immediately preceding the theophany, the text reports
that the king's death and renewed oppression of Israel causes
the people's cry to rise up to God. Thus, the interview
between YHWH and Moses appears to be the manner which YHWH
chooses to respond to the people's outcry. The effect of

this is to suggest that what follows arises out of interaction between God and people. YHWH does not take initiative entirely. YHWH reacts to a configuration of human events plus the prayers of his people. This theme of God interacting with his people is a striking feature in the sending of Moses which follows. Indeed, YHWH initiates what is about to happen at the burning bush. But Moses' objections and hesitations help shape the final nature of his commission.

It is helpful to observe that Moses' initial foray into Pharaoh's court ends disastrously. Pharaoh intensifies the work burdens on the people to quell any uprising which might be brewing. This, in turn, leads Moses to ask, "O Lord...why didst thou ever send me?" (Exodus 5.22). All of this is an element in the theology of Exodus which assigns to YHWH all credit for miraculously delivering Israel. Moses' bold word to Pharaoh (5.1) is not sufficient to loosen the chains of slavery. This will only be achieved with YHWH's active presence in Moses.

2.   Structure

The sending of Moses takes the form of a typical call narrative such as that of Gideon (Judges 6.11-24) or Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1.4-9). This text corresponds to this form as follows:

        Divine Confrontation 1-4a
        Introductory Word   4b-9
        Commission 10
        Objection 11
        Reassurance   12a
        Sign 12b

Moses' call greatly expands and repeats the objection-reassurance element, stretching it to 4.17. This dialogue is resumed in chapter 6. This extended dialogue and even tension between Moses and YHWH has been variously interpreted. Some say it allows numerous traditions to be represented in Moses' commissioning. Brevard Childs suggests that the prophetic tradition begins here: "The patriarchs received revelation in theophanies, but had no commission to transmit a message to others"[151]

Because so much of the objection-reassurance dialogue concerns the message which Moses will bear, we can draw important conclusions about what exactly is the nature of Moses' transformation in this scene. Moses embodies God's immanence in large part by bearing God's word. Where Moses before was impotent to stop Egyptian oppression or bring peaceable community among the Hebrews, now he will return to Egypt bearing YHWH's message and in conversational intimacy with YHWH.

3. Selected Content

It is striking that YHWH--the Almighty who will bring devastating force to crush the Egyptians--is deferential and patient with Moses' hesitations. Not only does Israel's out-cry have impact on YHWH's activity, so do Moses' objections. Some of the final plan for the Exodus develops in this conversation rather than in the unilateral will of God. Notably, the inclusion of Aaron as a partner with Moses seems to be God's accommodation to Moses' concerns.

Moses' transformation inaugurates dialogue where before he was subject to YHWH's providence, which is at once obvious but not explicit in the first two chapters.

Moses' transformation is essentially a call or commissioning. As such, it is context-determined. In other words, Moses isn't transformed and then sent to serve in some situation.

Related to this is the fact that many of the elements of the future are already contained in germ-form in the burning bush scene. Israel's entire history--past and future--is summarized in this revelation (3.6-8). God sees and hears the oppressed (3.9). This sensitivity to the downtrodden is obviously part of Moses' and Israel's future identity. The divine name is disclosed (3.14). Moses and Israel will constitute the community which calls upon the divine name. Moses encounters YHWH at Horeb which will be the site of Israel's future encounter with God.

Thus, this turning point for Moses is not detached from his future as, say, a college's acceptance of a student is prior to and separate from the major she will choose. In Moses' case, his commissioning contains what it creates.

Moses' call is not a paradigm for other calls so much as it is a paradigm for the rest of Moses' life.

ISAIAH'S TEMPLE VISION
Exegetical Notes for Isaiah 6.1-13
May 22, 1994

1.   Context:

For a class studying conversion, the single most tanta-
lizing feature of Isaiah is the placement of the prophet's
call narrative in the sixth chapter. This fact, combined
with considerable scholarly difficulties in determining the
book's overall structure, raises as many questions as it
resolves about Isaiah's call. For the purpose of the class
on conversion it would be better not to review at length
theories on Isaiah's overall structure.

Some observations on structure, however, are illuminat-
ing. First, there is little contextual evidence that the
location of the call narrative in the sixth chapter signals a
mid-career commissioning experience. It is important to take
seriously the span of Isaiah's career beginning with Uzziah's
death and ending with Hezekiah's death as indicated by the
superscription (1.1). It follows that the prophet's earthly
career of the prophet is not coterminous with the span of the
canonical Book of Isaiah. The first five chapters together
with the final chapters (40-66) constitute a theological
frame possibly contemporary with the book's original
audience. The fact that historical references are notably
absent outside of chapters 6-39 count in favor of this or a
similar view. Thus, on the basis of contextual evidence
only, Isaiah 6 seems to be an inaugural vision which
legitimizes and launches the prophet's career.

It should be noted that contrary views exist. These
typically assert that Isaiah's career of Isaiah is underway
prior to chapter six. While this evidence is not compelling,
the conclusion that it points to is more compatible with the
conclusion which we will ultimately draw, namely that Isaiah
6 is not an event which launches the prophet's career, but a
special commissioning within that career.

Contextual evidence used for this conclusion is as fol-

lows. Chapter five uses first person speech, apparently that
of the prophet, which is differentiated from divine speech.
In this view, the Song of the Vineyard becomes an opening
instance of Isaiah's prophetic activity. And it is histori-
cally prior to Isaiah's commissioning in Chapter 6.

While this opinion that the Chapter 6 commissioning is a
mid-career event seems contrived, it does square with an
observation we will make later as we discuss the actual con-
tent of the call. This is that the prophet seems to consider
himself already called when he volunteers to be sent (6.8).
A second observation about the literally context of Is-
aiah's call is that the reader must read through five
chapters before learning of the prophet's call. When compared
with Jeremiah's call, this fact speaks clearly about the
proportional significance between the prophet's word and the
prophet's person. In Isaiah, the word is primary while
biographical details are sketchy. The prophet's personal
religious experience thus is hardly an end in itself.
Neither does Isaiah ever make explicit any response which
Isaiah might have to his commission. Thus the commissioning
of Isaiah all but drowns out the prophet himself.

2.   Structure:

While evidence derived from this text's literary setting
does not resolve whether Isaiah's Temple vision is an inaugu-
ral call or a subsequent commissioning, evidence from the
text's form does. Most commentators on this passage point
out that it is a clear example of one of two styles of Old
Testament call narratives. The first style is dominated by
the word of YHWH which overcomes the resistant called person.
Only through dialogue, persuasion, and assurance accompanied
by signs is the prophet moved to act. Moses' and Jeremiah's
calls are examples of this first type.

The second type, the pattern which characterizes
Isaiah's vision, is different. Essentially a vision, this
type has no element of reluctance or persuasion. Instead the
prophet is presented with a vision, in this case, of the
majesty of the Lord in a pantheon of heavenly beings. The
prophet is one of the beings in the heavenly council. As
such, he volunteers to bear the message. Isaiah's subsequent
prophecy is his functioning as a divine messenger. His
legitimacy as a prophet obtains in the fact that he has stood

in the divine council

The vision is not a private religious experience. It provides an account of Isaiah's right and duty to proclaim the message. Legitimation of Isaiah's prophetic activity is the point.

3.   Comment

As for Isaiah's vision itself, it bears some of the elements of the Sinai Theophany including trembling, smoke, and terror. Further, Isaiah seems to be encountering YHWH in both his earthly abode--the Jerusalem Temple--and his heavenly dwelling. In this setting are heavenly beings offering continual worship.

The proclamation by the seraphim of YHWH's holiness and glory expresses the complex understanding that the Lord is at once transcendent and distinct from his creatures, but also engaged with what he has created. Thus, the seraphim hide their faces and Isaiah becomes aware of his sin. But YHWH is also worshipped in all places of his dominion. And YHWH commissions Isaiah to bear his message.

Isaiah's feeling of guilt upon entering the Temple most closely relates to Temple entrance liturgies such as those expressed in Psalms 15 or 24. The prophet, further, feels his personal stake in Judah's collective guilt. Consciousness of such guilt is a strong Old Testament theme. This twofold uncleanness, in turn, prevents Isaiah's access to the Temple.

The sacramental act of forgiveness--the touching of the unclean lips--not only make Isaiah suitable to remain in the Temple, but also sets him apart from his people. It is helpful to contrast a similar gesture which occurs in Jeremiah's call. The Lord's touch of Jeremiah's mouth functions to place the divine message within the prophet. In Isaiah's experience, the touch opens the way for Isaiah to enter the heavenly council. The word which YHWH gives to Isaiah comes later in direct speech.

The theophany in this narrative, while vivid, is not in itself the point of the text. It is not sufficient to impart to the prophet his commission. In keeping with this, Isaiah

does not describe what he saw. Rather, his vision of God prepares him to hear the Lord's question and volunteer for special service.

As for the prophetic message itself--it is so negative one wonders if it can serve as the basis of an entire career. This again undergirds our growing conviction that this whole event is a special commissioning within Isaiah's career which does not establish his identity as a prophet, but rather occupies Isaiah for a limited period of time (6.11f).

Specifically, Isaiah is called to preach in such a way as to harden the people's hearts and thus to make inevitable their destruction. Several commentators feel that by announcing the ultimate failure of Isaiah's message, YHWH prepares the prophet psychologically to deal with the non-responsiveness of his hearers. It is clear that as the people ignore the message, there will be no possibility of blaming the prophet for failing to bear the word faithfully.

The final verse (6.13) is of particular interest. It seems to be directed to inhabitants of Judah who may take refuge in the in the notion that Judah itself is the tenth which will remain indestructible. The image of the stump which remains after the oak is felled is a false image of hope. No new shoot will be allowed to spring up from the stump because it will be burned over again. In other words, Judah will be destroyed as Israel before it.

Only the "holy seed;" some sort of remnant will remain. This is the sole element of hope and future in this passage.

In summary, Isaiah's call establishes the prophet's authority on three levels. First, Isaiah is given access to the divine council. Second, he is commissioned to declare the Lord's word to the people. And third, the declaring of this word actually functions to bring to pass the event of judgment.

Finally, this unusual commissioning is unimaginable in any other historical setting. Isaiah's commissioning bears no signs of being a fulfilling personal experience of transformation. Rather, it is a word spoken in a particular historical circumstance. For this difficult task it is the prophet who steps forward in order to serve.

APPENDIX III

FACETS OF CONVERSION

-complete surrender of will
-recognizing brokenness
-turmoil-to-inner-peace
-a life-changing experience
-a sequence of events
-leaves "bad taste"
-re-affirmation of faith
-accepting the gift of grace
-all things old become new
-commitment
-series of little conver-
    sions
-overblown
-faith given without change
    (for some)
-a wake-up call
-new awareness of God's pre-
    vious presence
-connected with the size of
    the "hole in your
heart"
-one-on-one relationship
with Jesus
-need is prerequisite
-head knowledge to heart
    knowledge
-associated with "religious
    nut"
-different for everybody
-God's choice to "hit ya"
-conflicts with predestina-
    tion
-is the opposite of slow
    growth
-openness to Jesus
-comes from the Holy Spirit
-is predestined
-entails commissioning
-not an end product, but a
    beginning
-another disciple is acting
-irresistible power moves

-chosenness
-disciples are called for
    different purposes
-followed by long period of
    sanctification

WHO:
-all people
-those who ask

-those called by the Spirit
    and respond
-and are baptized
-baptism not necessary
-those who have gone through
    hard times

WHEN:
-any time
-during times of change
-at age of understanding
-after hard times
-adolescence
-when a person is ready to
    be receptive

WHERE:

-anywhere
-where you're alone
-where you need to be to be
        open

WHY:

-predestined
-purpose, commission
-to be a role model for ot-
    hers
-to go on a great adventure
    of rediscovery of
"God-part of you"

one

-indwelling of the Holy Spi-
    rit

-different from person to
    person

    -to influence others who
    might do great things

APPENDIX IV.

FINAL QUESTIONNAIRE AND RESULTS

CONVERSION IN RETROSPECT
May 29, 1994

<u>Course Evaluation</u>

1.   How many of the eight classes on "Conversion in Retro-
    spect" were you able to attend? **(Numbers of sessions:
    7,8,8,5,7,7,7,7,2,8)**

2.   Choose those statements which best describe the work you
    did in addition to your class attendance. (You may
    select more than one.)

    a. I read the Bible lessons in advance of the class. **(8
    circled)**

    b.   I purchased Kerr and Mulder's book, <u>Conversions</u>.
    (6 circled)

    c.   I read some or all of that book. How much?_____
    (6 circled)
    (Comments:
    -1/2
    -Still reading, I found some rather deep reading
    -Six Chapters
    -15 pages
    -1/4
    -70%)

    d.   I engaged in conversation with another person about
    feelings or ideas on conversion or other topics
    which arose in the class. Describe_____

    _____

(9 circled)
(Comments:
-At work I shared with co-workers and used the
ideas   **to help plan a project**
-I talked with Rev. DeCelle
-I did talk with another person and we felt we were
able to see conversion in a more understanding
way
-I talked with a friend from Church of God on "born
again" concept. She too thinks we encounter God
numerous times
-what is conversion and how it influences us)

e.   I used other ways to continue learning outside of
       the eight class sessions. Describe_____
       _____
(2 circled)
(Comments:
-Shared with my mother also
-Talking with others and reading books
-Discussions with other people about conversion
-Bible study
-I read literature to expose how authors felt about
God. Browning, Capote, Sexton, Worsdworth, and
Hood.)

3.   How did the presentation of the Bible Study segment of
      the classes help you to understand conversion?

      a.   Very helpful **(10 circled)**
      b.   Somewhat helpful **(1 circled)**
      c.   Somewhat unhelpful
      d.   Not helpful
      e.   Comments_____
            (Comments:
            -helped me understand experiences are different
            -helped me get a better idea that conversion is not
            such a negative experience
            -very enlightening
            -very enlightening to contrast the Scriptures with
      conventional ideas of conversion and/or being born
      again
            -did not attend often enough
            -We need to know and understand what the Bible says
            about this. Most of us have been too fearful that
      we cannot read and interpret the Word of God.)

4.   How did you experience the atmosphere in the class?

    a.   very conducive to learning and discussing
       (10 circled)
    b.   somewhat conducive to learning and discussing
       (2 circled)
    c.   somewhat discouraging of learning and discussing
    d.   not at all conducive of learning and discussing
    e.   Comments_____
       (Comments:
       -the discussion was very helpful
       -very open and felt it was easy to talk
       -extremely so
       -conversion experiences/significant life changing
events are difficult to discuss
       -I feel comfortable with my own experiences even
though mine has not been earth shattering.
       -learning from the Scriptures and discussion among
he class)

5.   If we presented this class again what should we consider changing?
       (Comments:
       -Nothing--maybe more examples from the Bible. I
liked the child care service
       -more personal experience
       -It would be helpful to have an overall diagram/-
          chart   or   whatever   that   showed   the
commonalities   of   the   Biblical   conversion
experiences--add   to   the   chart   each   week   as   we
discussed themes
       -nothing, perfect as is
       -no real changes--I liked the larger group, the
interaction, etc.
       -nothing
-This seemed successful--for various reasons I could not
       come at 9:00 a.m. or had choir at 10:00 a.m.
-Have same lady describe her experience. Have another
       person from a more fundamental church who had had a
       dramatic encounter with God speak--and who also had
       received the Holy Ghost--explain this too
       -more examples of conversions from writings)

6.   On the back of this sheet please share any comments,

information, or thoughts that might help us better understand how this class affected the participants.
(Comments:

-It showed me that I cannot separate church from work from family etc. They all work together. Conversion is part of this--little conversions

-A crucial aspect of the class was having the two people who came to share their conversion experiences, partly because they were so different. That helped to validate the differences in experiences.

-I learned that the conversion experience can be different for each person and there is no one set way or experience. "Born Again" can have many definitions and ways of being and experience--not just the way the fundamentalists dictate.

-I believe the participants feel more at ease with their own Christian life because it is okay to have small individualistic experiences, and not to ever have a major experience with God.)

(Number of questionnaires submitted: 12)

ENDNOTES

CHAPTER I

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5.   Roberta Hestenes: Using the Bible in Groups (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), p. 12ff.

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7.   Noll, Mark A. Ed.: The Princeton Theology 1812-1921: Scripture, Science, and Theological Method from Archibald Alexander to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), p. 18.

8.   Ahlstrom, History, p. 237.

9.   Edith Blumhofer: "Evangelism in Pre-Civil War American Presbyterianism," (Unpublished paper given at the "Faithful Witness Conference" held at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary on March 18-19, 1993), p. 16.

10. C. Ellis Nelson: How Faith Matures (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 21.

11.   Ahlstrom, <u>History</u>, p. 1095.

12.   Ahlstrom, <u>History</u>, p. 966-1096.

13. Martin Marty: <u>The Modern Schism: Three Paths to the Secular</u> (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 96ff.

14. Diogenes Allen: <u>Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: The Full Wealth of Conviction</u> (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press 1989), p. 26.

15.   <u>Ibid</u>. p. 23.

16.   Roof and McKinny, <u>Mainline Religion</u>, p. 56.

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22.   Nelson, <u>How Faith Matures</u>, p. 77.

23.   Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks <u>Re-Forming Tradition</u>, p. 256.

CHAPTER II

24.   Hugh T. Kerr and John Mulder, <u>Conversions: The Christian Experience</u> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983).

25. Lewis R. Rambo, "Current Research on Religious Conversion: "<u>Religious Studies Review</u> Vol. 8, No. 2, (April 1982), p. 145-159.

26. Gabriel Fackre, "Conversion," <u>The Andover Newton</u>

<u>Quarterly</u>, Volume 14 (January, 1974), p. 188.

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28. <u>Ibid</u>. p. 7.

29. <u>Ibid</u>. p. 9.

30. <u>Ibid</u>. p. 12.

31. <u>Ibid</u>.

32. <u>Ibid</u>. p. 84-5.

33. Ludwig Wittgenstein, <u>Philosophical Investigations</u>, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), p. 2e-39e.

34. <u>Ibid</u>. p. 32.

35. <u>Ibid</u>.

36. <u>Ibid</u>.

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38. Except Acts 15.3

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45. Kerr and Mulder, <u>Conversions</u>, p. XII.

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48. Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, <u>The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England</u> (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), p. 242.

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CHAPTER III

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60. <u>Ibid</u>.

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80. <u>Ibid</u>. p. 47.

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p. 34ff, suggests five factors which should be considered in
choosing an adult religious education model: 1) The nature of
the learner, 2) the nature of the substantive content, 3) the
nature of the resource base, 4) the situational context of
learning, and 5) the facilitator. In the main, our fourfold
scheme follows this and subsumes the "resource base" under
"facilitator." This is because I, the teacher of the class,
had considerable resources at my disposal. Further, the
students were not required to search for resources.

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111. <u>Ibid</u>. p. 43-44.

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113. Daniel O. Aleshire, <u>Faithcare: Ministering to All God's
People Through the Ages of Life</u> (Philadelphia: The Westmin-
ster Press, 1988), p. 58.

114. Gabriel Moran, <u>Religious Education Development</u> (Minne-
apolis, Minnesota: Winston Press, Inc. 1983), p. 157.

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mingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1982).

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sity of Wisconsin Press, 1961).

117. A. Knox, <u>Adult Learning and Development</u> (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977), p. 537.

118. Malcolm Knowles, <u>The Modern Practice of Adult Education</u> (Chicago: Follet/Associated Press, 1980).

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121. McKenzie, <u>Adults</u>, p. 95.

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125. James W. Fowler, <u>Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning</u> (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981).

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128. Aleshire, <u>Faithcare</u>, p. 150.

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130. Seward Hiltner: "Toward a Theology of Conversion in the Light of Psychology" in Walter E. Conn ed.: <u>Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation</u> (New York: Alba House, 1978), p. 187.

131. Little, <u>To Set One's Heart</u>, p. 52.

CHAPTER V

132. Elliot W. Eisner, <u>The Educational Imagination: On the</u>

Design and Evaluation of School Programs. 2nd Edition. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), p. 192ff.

133. Ibid. p. 205.

134. Several months following the class, Pat told me that the experience energized her own commitment to Christ and gratitude. As she told me this, she cited Psalm 77 and explained how remembering God's goodness to her had precipitated a fresh sense of encounter with God. This kind of experience is precisely what the course intends for all participants.

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142. Institutes. 4.13.14

143. Institutes. 4.1.4.

144. Institutes. 4.1.5.

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146. Stendahl, <u>Paul</u>, p. 80.

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