

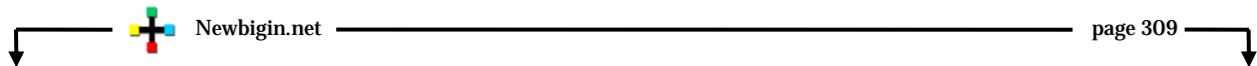


Conversion

J. E. Lesslie Newbigin

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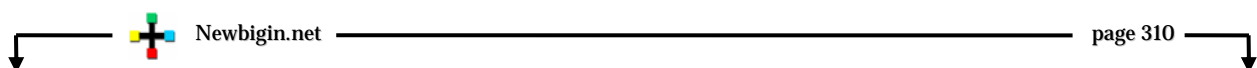


Notes of an address given at the Nasrapur Consultation, March 1966

I

In taking up a subject of this kind, everything depends upon the starting point. The more one examines the various systems of theology that compete for our allegiance, the more one is impressed by the fact that the whole system is determined by the starting point. One must start somewhere, and the starting point is not the result of a previous train of reasoning, but is selected by an act of intuition - by an act of faith. One could start a discussion of conversion at various points. One could begin, for instance, with the general consensus of the religions of mankind on the subject - if such exists. One could look at the experiences of conversion in different religions and establish some general ideas before coming to speak about conversion from a Christian point of view: One could start from a psychological basis and can undertake psychological studies in conversion. Or one could start from the present religious and cultural situation, the population explosion, the resurgence of non-Christian religions, the end of colonialism and so forth, and then, argue about what it is reasonable for Christians to expect or attempt.

I am not accepting any of those starting points. I am starting with Jesus as He is presented to us in Scripture, that is to say, in the context of the history of which He is a part. As I have said, this is an act of faith which I do not propose to justify by any arguments. The starting point is only justified, if at all, at the conclusion.



II

We shall begin with the fact, on which all the four Gospels agree, that the beginning of the ministry of Jesus was the appearance of John the Baptist with a summons to radical repentance in view of the approach of God's Kingdom, a repentance marked by the act of baptism. It is important, I think, to note that later in His ministry when our Lord was challenged about His authority, He used the baptism of John as the test by which one could judge whether or not man was capable of recognizing the authority of God. 'The baptism of John - was it from heaven or

from men?' When they said 'We do not know', He said 'Then neither do I tell you by what authority I do these things'. According to the fourth Gospel Jesus says to another of the elders - of the Jews that without the baptism of water and the Spirit it is impossible to see the Kingdom of God. The baptism and preaching of John is not only the chronological starting point of the ministry of our Lord; according to the record it is also in a sense accepted by him as decisive in relation to our recognition of the authority of God.

This preaching and baptism of John is in the line of the Old Testament prophets. It is from one point of view a continuation of the prophetic call to return to the Lord, to turn back, to be converted. And therefore let me say something about that prophetic line in the O.T.

III

It is primarily a call to the people as a whole to return to the covenant. But note three points:

(i) Firstly, this fact that it is addressed to the people as a whole does not exclude but leads on to the idea of its applicability to the individual. This becomes clear in the idea of the remnant, (only a remnant shall be converted) an idea which takes concrete form in Isaiah's assembling a group of disciples, and in the fact that the O.T. prophetic line leads to the concept of a new covenant of which one of the marks will be a proper individualism. 'This is a covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days. I will put my laws within them. I will write it upon their hearts. I will be their God and they shall

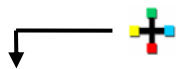


be my people. No longer shall each man teach his neighbour and his brother saying Know the Lord for they shall all know me'. Thus although the prophetic call is basically and originally a call to the people as a whole that does not exclude but leads into the call to return to be converted, addressed to the individual.

(ii) Secondly, it is a call to concrete obedience here and now. It is not the offer of an inward and private and spiritual experience following which one looks around and decides what kind of expression one is to choose. It is a call exactly to be converted, to be turned around, to behave differently here and now in all sorts of private and public responsibilities. I have personally in the last few months had two rather vivid experiences of the tremendous power of the hangover in our minds of a conception of conversion which is purely an inward and spiritual experience to which the ethical implications are added later. One was the first draft of an essay written on the theme 'Conversion and Social Change'. The writer said that before the children of Israel could have the experience of communion with God which was given to them on Mount Sinai they had to be liberated from slavery and taken out of Egypt. The social change was the pre-condition for conversion. I think this is a misunderstanding of the Exodus story, and that the real moment of conversion was the moment at which when Moses came to the children of Israel as slaves and said to them: 'The Lord has sent me to deliver you', and though at first they would not believe because of bitterness of spirit, finally they bowed their heads and believed and accepted. That was the moment of conversion, the moment at which they accepted God's purpose for them to get out of Egypt and become a free people. The idea that this was the sort of sociological precondition of conversion; conversion itself being a subsequent religious experience, seems to me to be a misunderstanding of the biblical story.

The second example was a paper given at the W.C.C. Central Committee in which the speaker said that conversion has to be followed by: 'a later diaconical decision based on other supplementary theological principles'. This was immediately challenged in the discussion, but the

fact that such a phrase could be used seems to me to illustrate the extraordinary power of the idea that conversion is one kind of experience and that the decision to act



in a certain way is another kind of experience which follows later. As I read the O.T. the call to return, the call to be converted is a call to quite concrete obedience now in relation to the covenant as it has been and is interpreted by the prophets.

(iii) Thirdly, the call to return although it is a call back to the covenant given in the past also looks forward to the consummation of God's righteous purpose in the future. It is not only a call back but also a call forward, because it is a call to be turned back to the Lord, and the Lord is He who goes before in the pillar of cloud, and in the pillar of fire. This orientation towards the future is, of course supremely prominent in the preaching of John the Baptist, the call to repentance in view of the approach of the Kingdom and of the Messiah.

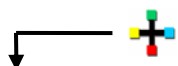
IV

Continuing to follow Mark's record we have it that after the 40 days in the wilderness Jesus returns with the following message: 'The time is fulfilled the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel'. Turn round! Look the other way! Believe what I am telling you, namely that God's righteous reign is at the door. That is the message which according to St Mark's Gospel introduces and, sums up the whole ministry of Jesus. That defines the meaning of conversion as it is in the teaching of Jesus. It is a turning around in order to recognize and participate in the dawning reality of God's rule.

What then does that turning round involve? It involves at least these three elements, and the question of their relationship to each other is the point where we begin to divide. It involves an inward relationship of faith, it involves a way of behaviour, and it involves a visible companionship. It is the relationship of these three things to one another which constitute the area of debate, but in some sense we all would agree that these three are involved. We shall return to these three elements later.

V

Continuing through St Mark's Gospel we read that passing along the Sea of Galilee He saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting their net in the sea because they were fishermen.



Jesus said 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men'. Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. Having summarized in one sentence the essence of the message that Jesus was giving, Mark tells us that Jesus didn't simply broadcast this announcement and leave it to those interested to apply for further information. He actually went out and as it were laid hold of people and turned them round so that they faced His way. In the most concrete possible sense He went out and laid hold upon certain men whom He had chosen. In that sense of the word their conversion was His work. 'You did not choose me, I chose you'. He Himself is the one who converts. This reminds us of the great prayer of Elijah on Mount Carmel: 'Answer me O Lord, answer me that this people may know that Thou O Lord art God and that Thou hast turned their hearts back'. This conversion is the act of the living Lord Himself.

It has also been pointed out that it is significant that Jesus chose twelve. He did not simply broadcast an announcement and the acceptances happened to add up to 12. The number was his choice. To use the phrase we have all become accustomed to using, it means that those disciples represent the *pars pro toto*, the part for the whole, the whole being the people of Israel. But here we come to one of our points of division. This concept of the part for the whole, is a part of our ecumenical thinking, and rightly so; it is a very important biblical idea. Our divergencies are at the point of asking what exactly does the *pro* mean. Does it mean that the part is there in place of the whole, so that the whole doesn't need to be converted? Or does it mean the part for the whole in the sense that the part is in order that the whole may be converted? Here in this passage the answer seems to be clear. 'I will make you fishers of men', must mean 'I have converted you in order that you may go and convert others'. The meaning of the *pro* at that point seems to be quite clear. In the other passage that I quoted the words 'You did not choose me, but I chose you' are immediately followed with 'that you may go and bear fruit'. On the other hand, the other meaning of the *pro* is wholly excluded. I think there is a tension here which we will come back to, and which is perhaps ultimately resolved only in the end.

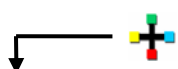


VI

We move now from the Gospels to the beginning of the apostolic preaching after the cross and the resurrection. Even though the Gospel narratives are largely within Judaism, there is always the consciousness of the wider horizon. We remember such words as 'Many will come from the East and the West and it down in the kingdom', and the great saying in the context of the visit of the Greek enquirers: 'I if I am lifted up will draw all men unto myself'. The narrative of Acts seems to me makes it absolutely clear that this drawing is not a sort of painless or unconscious process. It is not simply that the world has been saved even though it does not know it. The character of Christ's action is the same throughout. It is a call for radical repentance, conversion and baptism. When the people heard the first Christian preaching they were cut to the heart and said to Peter 'What shall we do?' Peter said 'Repent, be baptised everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the Holy Spirit. The promise is to you and your children and to all that are afar of, everyone whom the Lord calls'. That doesn't mean, however, that the promise doesn't need to be accepted. There is an R.S.V.P. on this card. 'And those who received the word were baptized and there were added that day three thousand souls, and they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers'.

This, at the beginning of Acts, corresponds to what we have seen at the beginning of Mark. It is the call to radical conversion and commitment, and to becoming part of a visible fellowship.

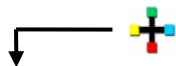
Similar language is used when we find the apostles beginning to talk to the gentiles, to the pagans outside of Judaism. When the pagan people of Lystra think that Paul and Barnabas are gods and try to offer sacrifice, Paul cries out to them 'Why are you doing this? We are men like you and bring you good news that you should turn from these vain things to the living God Who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them'. Again in a very pregnant phrase he addresses the Church in Thessalonica as those who have 'turned (been converted) from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from Heaven'.



To sum up very briefly, the evidence of Acts is in line with the word at the close of St Luke's gospel: 'Thus it is written that Christ should suffer, that He should rise from the dead, and that the repentance and forgiveness of sin should be preached in his name to all nations'. The universality of Christ's lordship over all nations and over all creation is not, in the New Testament, a ground for leaving all the nations as they are. It is on the other hand exactly the ground for the Church's mission to preach repentance to every man and to all nations. The logic of the matter is most clearly set out in Romans 10:12 and the following verse: 'There is no distinction between Jew and Greek the same Lord is Lord of all, and bestows his riches upon all who call upon Him. For, everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved'. This is a very complete statement in the universality of Christ's rule. The text goes on 'How are men to call upon Him if they do not believe? How are they to believe if they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?' That is the logic of universality as St Paul interprets it.

VII

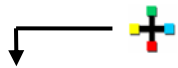
This passage provides the transition to the most hotly debated part of our theme; it leads into the great debate about the church and the world: It begins with a most tremendous affirmation of the universality of God's love for all men equally without distinction - the Jew and the Greek, the Churchman and the pagan. The same Lord is Lord of all. It is also the passage in which we have the most radical assertion of the freedom of God over against His people. According to this passage it is the pagans who believe and are saved and it is the chosen people who are stubborn. The same passage continues: 'Moses said: I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation, with a foolish nation I will make you angry. Isaiah is so bold as to, say "I have been found by those who did not seek me. I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me". But of Israel he says "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people".' Thus the text is not only an assertion of the universality of Christ's rule; it is also an assertion of the absolute freedom of God *vis-à-vis* His covenant people. But the text also insists upon the necessity for belief, for turning to the Lord in conscious belief and verbal confession.



'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified; and confesses with his lips and so is saved'. The gentiles who were spoken of in verse 20: 'I have been found by those who did not seek me, I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me' are the believing gentiles. There can be no doubt about that. This text therefore raises the question which is the centre of our debate - the relation of conversion and faith to the visible structure of the Church. The question has been put by Dr Baago in the following brief form: Does a Hindu have to become a Christian in order to belong to Christ?

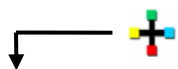
Here we have to pick our way through a barbed-wire entanglement of half-truths. Let me try to state the matter as clearly as I can. A text like this reminds us that God is not a prisoner of the Church. God according to the universal testimony of Scripture in the Old and New Testament has chosen and called a people for his service. In the Old Testament it is Israel; in the N.T. it is the new Israel - the wild olive grafted on the old stock. But throughout the Bible, God's choice leaves God still wholly free in relation to His people. 'You only have I chosen, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities' he says to Amos. God is free both to reject His own people and to raise up children of Abraham out of the gentiles. The crucial conflict came over the issue of circumcision. After a tremendous debate it was finally agreed that the gentiles were not to be circumcised. In other words the gentile church is to be genuinely a gentile church. It is not that there are to be Judean 'Church Extension Charges' in Ephesus or Corinth or Rome. There are not

to be Judea chaplaincies in Philippi or Thessalonica. It is to be a genuinely gentile church. Those of you who have read Roland Allen will remember the very vivid passage in which he pictures the feelings of a Jewish Christian of Jerusalem visiting the Church in Corinth on a Sunday morning: How absolutely shocked he would be at something which would seem to him to be indescribably pagan! But the position for which St Paul and his colleagues stood and which was accepted was that the gentile church was to be a genuinely gentile church. The corn of wheat is to fall into the ground. There is to be a new creation, which will not be just an extension or reproduction of the old.



Here let me refer to a classic example of this same principle in the action of Robert de Nobili when he decisively left behind him the Portugese Mission compound outside Madurai. He had come to see that simply to ask the Brahmins of Madurai to leave the world in which they lived and become a part of that Portugese compound was not Christian mission. The corn of wheat in the person of Robert de Nobili had to go and disappear into the temple quarters in the middle of Madurai in order that a new thing might be created. One could take as a similar example, the Sheffield Industrial Mission. Simply to invite the steel workers of Sheffield to come and join one of the innumerable churches at Sheffield was not a discharge of the Church's mission to the steel workers. It was necessary to leave the churches behind and disappear into the steel mill not knowing quite what would come out, not yet knowing now, 20 years later, what will come out. That seems to me to be one very vital aspect of the truth that has to be held on to.

But there are certain other things that must also be said: the first is this. The reason why the Church reached its decision not to demand circumcision is clearly and explicitly set out in the record. It was because the Holy Spirit had been given to uncircumcised Gentiles. We have this argument set out in two places, Acts 11 and 15. We have it referred to in the Epistles in various ways. It was not an argument based on any teaching of Jesus. There was no explicit teaching of Jesus to justify the abandonment of circumcision. The decisive fact was that the Holy Spirit had been given to uncircumcised Gentiles. Here we come upon one of the points at which we need to examine our difference from the New Testament Church. In the N.T. Church, as I see it, the one thing about which you never have doubt is that the Holy Spirit has been given. In the throes of St Paul's terrific battle with the Galatians, when he is summoning all the argument that he can muster to deal with this very plausible idea that you really do need to be circumcised in order to fulfil the law of God, this is the argument that he falls back on. 'One thing I ask to you' he says: 'Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?' That they have received the Spirit, there is absolutely no doubt. The question is: How? Our general tendency is to turn the matter exactly the other way up. 'Were you episcopally confirmed? We ask; In that case you have

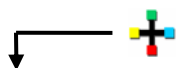


received the Spirit. 'Do you have the right belief? Did you sign a certain statement along the dotted line? In that case you have received the spirit'. This is one of the points at which we are most radically different from the N.T.

Here the argument is perfectly clear. Peter talks about his visit to Cornelius and then he goes on 'As I began to speak the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning and I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said: 'John baptised with water but you shall be baptised with the Spirit'. If then, God gave the same gift to them as He gave to us when they believed in the Lord

Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?' When they heard this they were silenced and they glorified God saying 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life'. The argument is absolutely clear. Something new has happened, and therefore the existing structure has to be reconsidered.

Secondly, however, while this gentile church is a new work and not only an extension of Judean Christianity, there is nevertheless a firm connection established. This is first of all established by the fact that they are baptized. There is no question anywhere about that. Secondly, they are called to share in the Lord's table. And thirdly, they are linked with the Judean Church through the ministry of the apostle and his colleagues. It is interesting, I think, that in the second chapter of the Ephesians in the same passage in which the writer is extolling the extraordinary fact that the middle wall between Jew and Gentile has been broken down, that these utterly different and hostile entities have been brought together in Christ, he stresses so strongly the fact that they are actually being built up into one single visible fellowship. 'You the Gentiles, the people who were right outside are no longer strangers and sojourners but fellow citizens built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief corner stone. You are built into it for a holy dwelling place of God. You are reconciled in one body'. Now of course there are people who hold that this one body is a purely spiritual idea. This is the view of the matter which is taken by the people who defend apartheid in the Church in South Africa; that this language about the one body is to be interpreted as a purely spiritual and mental affair. We are related to each other, but this outward relation does not involve being committed actually to live

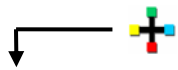


a common life. I can only say that it seems to me that, St. Paul passionately controverts that idea, and very clearly in his conflict with Peter at Antioch over the issue of table fellowship between the circumcised and uncircumcised Christians.

At this point I am tempted to throw in just one remark. I am interested in the suggestion which is being canvassed at present for separating the two sacraments so that one can consider inviting unbaptised Hindus to the Holy Communion. The idea seems to be that that will not commit them to solidarity with the Christian Church in the sense that baptism would. I cannot find any justification in the N.T. for separating the two sacraments in this way. It seems to me that they belong together as being both in their distinct modes the signs and means of the incorporation of new persons and new peoples into the visible body of Christ - baptism as the unrepeatable and the Holy Communion as the constantly repeated act. Indeed, the language of the New Testament about the sense in which the Holy Communion commits us to Christ and forbids our fellowship outside of Christ is far far stronger than anything the New Testament says about baptism. I need only remind you of the passages in 1 Corinthians which teach that participation in the Holy Communion commits you to Christ in such a way that to get involved with any kind of pagan worship would be unthinkable.

The point that I am trying to make is that while it is true that they did not circumcise the Gentiles, they did baptise them and receive them to the Lord's Supper. There is a discontinuity and there is also a continuity. Peter did not argue, as some would have argued, that because Cornelius and his family received the Holy Spirit without either circumcision or baptism, both rites were equally unnecessary. This would have been a logical argument on the face of it. But in fact when Peter saw that the Spirit was given to Cornelius and his company, he baptised them. In other words baptism is understood in the N.T. to be the sign and the seal and the means of this visible incorporation into Christ's people which is part, as we agreed earlier, of what is involved in conversion. The demand for baptism is not necessarily a demand that proceeds from the

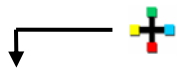
evangelist. It is constantly a demand that proceeds from the convert. I have had many experiences, and I am sure there are many others in this room who have had the same, of people whose introduction to the Gospel



has been entirely through having providentially got the N.T., or a Gospel into their hands and read it, and having thought about it have come and said 'I want to be baptised'. They have understood from the N.T. that this visible commitment to Christ's people is involved not by a demand made by any evangelist but by the intrinsic character of the revelation itself.

VIII

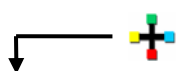
There is therefore both a discontinuity and a continuity. On the one hand every true conversion is a fresh work of the Holy Spirit and we cannot too much emphasise that fact. It is a new birth from above, and in that sense there is discontinuity - if the conversion of another is an act of my religious imperialism, it is not true conversion. There is a radical discontinuity and therefore the possibility of a certain radical independence of the newly converted over against the old, an independence as radical as the independence that is all demanded for the gentile churches *vis-a-vis* those of Jerusalem. But the N.T. knows nothing of a relationship to Christ which is a purely mental relationship and involves no visible solidarity with those who share that relationship. When Dr Baago puts the question 'Must Hindus become Christians in order to belong to Christ?' and answers 'No', he reaches his answer by loading the word 'Christian' with all the colonial and cultural baggage that he can get into it. If the word 'Christian' includes everything that has been perpetuated during the past 2000 years by people professing to be Christian, then we certainly do not wish Hindus to become Christians. But if we put the question the other way round and say 'Can a Hindu who has died and been born again in Christ be content to remain without any visible solidarity with his fellow believers', the answer is No. The real question is: what are the elements of continuity and what are the elements of discontinuity? This is the central issue to which Roland Allen devoted his passionate, sometimes irritating, but in my experience inescapable logic. Roland Allen basically said 'The modern missionary movement has completely misunderstood its purpose', it has attempted to export and impose upon the believers in Asia, Africa and the Pacific a whole lot of stuff which does not properly belong to the *tradendum*, to that which has to be handed over. If I understand him rightly



Roland Allen said that what has to be handed over, that which, in other words, constitutes 'the element of continuity' is as follows: the Scriptures, the Sacraments of baptism of the Lord's Supper and the Ministry. These things belong to the fundamental *tradendum*. Roland Allen therefore waged war against everything that missions had tried to bring apart from these - the whole apparatus of a professional ministry, institutions, church buildings, church organizations, diocesan offices and all the rest of it, everything from harmoniums to archdeacons.

But people have often been led to ask with justice whether Roland Allen himself was not oversimplifying the issues. If we go again to the N.T. we find that there is a considerable amount of doubt as to what exactly should and should not be handed over to the new converts. We often stop our reading of Acts 15 with the decision not to impose certain decision, but please note what follows in the letter: 'It has seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity'. That was the Jerusalem quadrilateral. In

fact it has not remained operative: It included Jewish food laws which no longer have any meaning to us. Even at that point where the radical decision was made the Jerusalem fathers were not completely radical. There were still certain elements in the sacred tradition that were to be preserved. Again we have to remember that large central section of the first letter to the Corinthians when St Paul distinguishes between what he says is his opinion and what he says is given by the Lord. Even in those things which he says are given by the Lord, we today may have doubts, as to whether some of them really do belong to the essential *tradendum*. I say that simply to remind you of the fact that there is no simple, clear-cut answer. There is both a continuity and a discontinuity. We can agree, with Roland Allen that modern 19th and 20th century missions have mixed up with the *tradendum* an enormous amount of stuff that doesn't belong to it. But we may not necessarily be able to accept the clear cut lines that he draws. Certainly for a long time, in spite of all that we have been looking at, the Roman authorities apparently thought that Christianity was a sort of extension of Judaism and treated it as such. It was only after many decades that that ceased to be so.

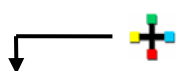


The conclusion that I draw personally is that the things mentioned in Acts 2:42, however we may interpret them, are fundamental, that they belong to the *tradendum*, that they are part of that which is involved, in the transmission of the Gospel. In other words, if they are not transmitted the Gospel has not been transmitted. I would not say with Roland Allen that everything else is excluded. I will simply say that everything else is subject to debate, and guidance according to the circumstances. The word 'Christian' properly means one who is baptized, who regularly shares in the Lord's Supper, and who abides in the teaching of the Apostles through faithful study of Scripture and the fellowship of other Christians through a common life of prayer and service. If that is what the word Christian means, I would say that a Hindu who wishes to belong to Christ should become a Christian.

We are confused about the answer to the question 'Should we try to make Hindus Christian' because we have loaded the word 'Christian' with wrong meanings. At this moment I am thinking of two groups of villagers whom I met the other day. The Holy Spirit has been doing a marvellous work among them and they want to become Christians. I cannot say to them: continue to live and worship as Hindus. Nor, on the other hand, do I want to take them into our ecclesiastical structure in such a way that they are simply moulded into replicas of ourselves. I want to say to them: Be baptised into Christ; come to the Holy Supper; study the Scriptures with us; and teach us all that the Holy Spirit has taught you so that we may become different because of what He has done with you.

IX

Having said all this I come back to a fundamental point which I touched upon earlier. The Church is, the *pars pro toto*. God converts a man not just that he may be saved, but that he may be the sign, earnest and instrument of God's total plan of salvation for the world. I want to end by quoting a sentence from the paper on this subject prepared by Dr Paul Loeffler of the World Council of Churches. 'Conversion', he writes, 'demands commitment of some - not for their own sake but for the salvation of all. Conversion has always this double dimension: as a call it is uttered to all



nations, as a potential it concerns the destiny of all men. But as a realisation here and now it singles out an exemplary few who begin to enter in the community of the Church. The temptation with conversion has often been to short-circuit this very eschatological tension, either by reserving it for the few who are saved, or by letting it be submerged in a universalism which does not recognise any form of definite commitment. Conversion bears the eschatological tension. It shares in the "already" in that it is a definite call to personal commitment to the visible but not limited corporate being of the Church in Christ. Conversion actually establishes a new relationship between God and man. Yet its fulfilment will be realised only through the consummation of all things. Conversion is a commitment to a companionship on the way. It lives towards the "not yet".*

The 19th century stressed one side of this tension. It tended to be obsessed by the thought that all those who had not made that personal commitment were everlastingly damned. Missions were a heroic struggle to stem that appalling avalanche. Our time is in danger of overstressing the other side of the tension, and losing all sense of the call to personal commitment in a general universalism. I cannot find anything in the New Testament to support what seems to be a widespread view today, namely that whereas it is tolerable to think of a few people being lost, it is intolerable to think of a majority of mankind being lost. Certainly this is not God's arithmetic according to the parables of Jesus. He is the one who cares for the unique individual, the last and least. I do not find in the New Testament a God who is impressed by majorities, or daunted by monster deputations.

We must not cut the tension of hope. We must not presume to prejudge the last Judgment. We know a few things, but they are enough: that the call of God is to all men; that those whom He chooses to convert are few; and that those few are chosen not for themselves but for the sake of all. If they forget that, they will be rejected.

* *Study Encounter*, Vol. I, No. 2, pp. 98-99.

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