

## Turning to God – Biblical Conversion in the Modern World

David Wells

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### Children

Some might question the propriety and validity of juxtaposing Paul's conversion and the conversion of children. Why should children be included as insiders? Certainly this comparison could be misleading. Some present-day evangelicals have portrayed elements of Paul's conversion as normative that Paul did not deem normative; for example, the suddenness, crisis, and drama of the event. In some evangelical circles, these are understood as hallmarks of a "genuine" conversion. Consequently, evangelicals often bring them to a point of "decision."

The children of Christian parents, however, sometimes do not have extended, clearly defined periods of rebellion they can remember and against which they can contrast their conversions. A child from a Christian home does not remember when he or she crossed the line from unbelief to belief. Even for children outside a Christian family, conversion may be more like a transition or a growth into Christ than a sudden and abrupt about-face like Paul's. Unless this is recognized, both evangelists and children will use the wrong criteria to measure conversion. They will look for suddenness, crisis, and drama, and if they do not find them, they may conclude that a genuine commitment to Christ has not occurred. Indeed, people who work with children have often encountered those who have made multiple "decisions for Christ" and who are still quite uncertain about their relationship with God.

The center of the Christian faith is a relationship with God through Jesus Christ that is based on understanding and believing the gospel. The element of understanding has been the focus of considerable discussion. What can children know and how—much must they know before conversion can occur? In *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (1964) Ronald Goldman warned about certain dangers in the evangelism of children. Some who evangelize children impose too much formal Bible knowledge at too early an age on children who are not capable of assimilating such knowledge. The current understanding of how children think is fluid; many of the older Piagetian assumptions are being challenged.

For many children, including those outside of Christian families, the first emphasis should be on a relationship with God. For others, what they know in theory will be experienced in relationships. Children are capable of belief, but as they experience new stages of life and personal development, their level of understanding (and belief) needs to grow. For children from Christian and non-Christian homes, this development will be characterized by many decisions toward Christ before the line is actually crossed into his kingdom. These decisions include the acknowledgment of Christian teaching, a growing awareness of personal sinfulness, and a desire to be right with God. For this reason, children (even those from non-Christian homes) often move toward Christ more like insiders than like outsiders.

Only God knows the exact moment of conversion for any person, including

children. The evangelist's responsibility is not to create or demand a predetermined response but to teach about the gospel, so that the child continues to respond until he or she reaches the point of trusting in Christ and the benefits of his death and resurrection. The point of comparison with Paul is not the experiential aspects of the Damascus road conversion (Paul himself did not consider his experience normative); it lies elsewhere.

First, like Paul, every child is a sinner who needs to be forgiven on the basis of Christ's work. With submission to Christ comes the Spirit's supernatural work of new birth and his reorientation of the sinner to Christ's values and service. Second, because the child is immature and is in the process of developing, conversion is often preceded by incremental movements toward Christ rather than by a sudden shift in worldview, such as might occur for an adult outsider. Therefore evangelists should exercise great sensitivity as they enter into the child's world—a world of immaturity but not necessarily of innocence. Today's children often have been exposed to or know about violence, brutality, and abuse at increasingly younger ages. Their childhoods are disappearing. Competitive, affluence-oriented interests intrude very early into their experience. Wars and calamities also may shape their outlook. It requires sensitivity and empathy to help a child move toward and into a relationship with Christ.

Our failure or neglect to reach children with the gospel might seem unimportant today, but in the future it will loom larger and larger. After all, in the ranks of today's children are tomorrow's world, national, and community leaders—the future philosophers, poets, theologians, scientists, doctors, politicians, preachers, counselors, and parents who will shape the basic values of their children. A life directed toward Christ at an early age can have enormous impact on the family and the world. The reorientation of values and worldview associated with Christian conversion could revolutionize the future of individuals who will shape tomorrow's world.

In this chapter, then, we have considered in some detail the most famous of all Christian conversions, that of Paul, and in less detail the conversions of children. The point in linking them together in a single chapter is the opposite of what might appear to be the case. It may seem that the intention is to establish as a model for the conversion of children the circumstances of drama and crisis that attended Paul's conversion. Evangelists have, in fact, often done this. This chapter has argued the reverse of that. It is *not* the drama and crisis of his conversion that Paul considered normative, for children or anyone else, although like Paul, some may experience dramatic conversions that are attended by a gainful sense of crisis. Paul's focus in telling about his own conversion was theological and not psychological.

The point of comparison between Paul and children, then, is theological and, specifically, that children are in the pattern of insider conversion. Paul and children are, however, insiders for different reasons. Paul's conversion fell into this pattern because of what he already knew: his profound knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, his training in Judaism, his zealous acceptance of many of the truths without which there can be no gospel. Paul already believed in the one God, accepted biblical revelation, understood its teaching on sin and the need for sacrifice, believed in God's judgment, and in some way anticipated a Messiah. This was not a small foundation upon which the gospel could rest! For children the pattern of coming to Christ is similar, not because they bring with them this set of beliefs, but because they need to have them built up as

a preparation for the gospel. They need to come into saving faith by incremental stages, making steps toward Christ as their knowledge of biblical truth grows and as their awareness of themselves as sinners, increases. It is important to build this foundation with patience and care and to resist the temptation to produce instant conversions. Young children often want to please parents and adults and it is therefore not difficult for teachers and evangelists to manipulate them into making a decision. But even if this is done with the best of motives, it is not the best, or even a desired, result. For what results is a misunderstood experience that later on may rebound in the form of a bitter resentment and disillusionment.

What is important is that the gospel be given a context, that it be understood within the framework that the Bible itself gives to it, that it be seen to grow out of God's holiness and love, that it be understood as addressing people, not simply for them to make a decision, but for them to understand their plight before God as defiant sinners. The gospel has no staying power, in the lives of adults or children, if it is torn from these connections. Then it becomes simply one more commodity for sale in a world flooded with competing commodities. Children not only can understand such matters, they must understand them. And it is a mark of wisdom on our part if we are willing to give them time to build these connections rather than short-circuiting the process in the interests of having conversion "results."