

# **Conversion Communities**

By: Chris Nichols



InterVarsity New England's Mission:  
To advance the Kingdom through  
whole-life conversion to Jesus;  
Seeing students move from  
Cynics to Seekers to Followers  
to Leaders to World Changers

Conversion is a difficult word for us. Not because we don't believe in what it means but because of how it has been used in religious circles. We hear the word and immediately think of the worst cases of manipulation by Christians to maneuver those who are not Christians into declaring faith in Jesus. We abhor the dishonesty that has gone with that kind of evangelism. Conversion as manipulation is contrary to fundamental basis of the gospel. Yet we can't simply eliminate the word because it is still be the best word to describe the transformational experience of becoming and being a Christian. Therefore, we must carefully but clearly define what it is that we mean by conversion.

To begin with, conversion cannot be limited to a simple change of allegiance for the unbeliever. Rather, all who are committed to a life of following Jesus will be changed at the most fundamental levels in a process that never stops until our life on the earth ends and we are with the Lord.

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That is to say, each of us is being (or ought to be) converted on a daily basis. Throughout our lives, God is asking each of us to make decisions to go further along the conversion continuum, moving

from cynic to seeker to follower to leader to world changer. Conversion speaks to us of both God's essential power in transforming us and our choice in welcoming Him in. There has never been nor will there ever be a single decision that propels us all the way to the end. Thus we declare with John Stott that we have, "Been converted, are being converted and will be converted."

Conversion is more than intellectual assent, though intellectual assent is required. Conversion is greater than changes in behavior, though such changes are necessary and inevitable. Rather, conversion takes all of who I am and moves me into a completely new direction. No part of me gets left behind. The magnitude of this change is rarely understood all at once but rather over time and by degrees. It is usually only in hindsight and over the course of a lifetime that we begin to grasp the totality of what has occurred. Thus, conversion is both immediately complete and yet never finished. It is free and yet costs us everything. It is simple and yet incomprehensibly complex. Conversion involves both God's essential power in transforming us and our essential choice in welcoming him.

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It is nothing less than Paul's call for us to actively pursue the "mind of Christ" while also awaiting to be "transformed by the renewing your mind," and the magnitude of the change cannot be entirely understood all at once but only over time and by degrees. It is only in hindsight, over a lifetime, that we begin to grasp the totality of the changes that have occurred. Conversion speaks to us of both God's essential power in transforming us and our choice in welcoming Him in.

Conversion is not easy, nor is it meant to be. The gospels are clear about the costs and the epistles press us on the complexities. Paul calls followers to have the "mind of Christ," to be transformed by the renewing your mind," and to "put on the armor of God." Yet is what we are to be about in relation to Jesus, individually and corporately.

As an organization, InterVarsity is in the conversion business. Our vision statement makes it clear that we are to be agents of God's revolutionary power to transform the lives of students at all stages of knowledge of Him. Jesus was also in the conversion business, calling all his followers to, "Go and make disciples of all nations...." Paul wrote the same, "Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord we try to persuade people," and a few verses later,

“All this is from God who has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” He names our calling as being, “... ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” We are agents of reconciliation, personally converting, our commitment to Christ growing deeper on a daily basis, and encouraging others to do likewise. We are assigned this role by God, for it is a role given to all who “believe by faith in the Lord Jesus’.

Our primary message of reconciliation is that God desires for all humankind be one with him. It’s our message to everyone in the campus community, students and faculty, activists and Greeks, athletes and scholars, religious and non-religious, Christians and non-Christians. We are asking that all who do not actively call Jesus Lord to consider his calls to faith and make steps of faith and belief toward him. And we are calling those of us who do have faith in Christ to continue to engage in the conversion experience of the Spirit. Our job is to sow seeds, to proclaim, to invite. This is God’s business of conversion, and he has invited us into partnership with him.

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We are then, inviting those without faith in Christ into a community of conversion. It is an invitation to those who have formerly been on the outside to join us in the radical transforming process of a community where everyone is in the process of change. We are not asking them to become insiders by a change of culture, habits, and dress. No, we are welcoming them into a place of transformation driven by a power outside of themselves that also resides inside the lives of each believer. That power is from the Holy Spirit, which comes into the lives of those who give themselves in faith to Christ.

Too often, however, the initial invitation is more like an invitation to cultural assimilation into one more unique minority culture where, if you wish to be an insider, accepted and welcomed, you must learn a new language, culture, rules to follow and behaviors to fit. In those kinds of Christian groups, radical changes required of new recruits but not necessarily of established members. Insiders are comfortable and have found their place. They know the ropes, they know the rules and they know the routine. Yet, compared to the new converts, their lives have gone dull. They no longer demonstrate the power of that initial transformation. Over time, the new converts simply conform to the institutionally imposed change of behavior and are ultimately converted to

being complacent insiders, no longer experiencing a lifelong saving transformation.

Our communities must not be like this. Conversion must be the daily, life-long experience of every disciple. It will mean that we will become increasingly committed to God's values and interests. It will mean that individually and corporately we will move toward healing and wholeness, and become committed to God's justice and his concerns for the disenfranchised at every level. It will mean that we will give our hearts and minds to all of humanity, confronting our own prejudices and fears and gaining a global perspective because it is God's perspective.

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If, therefore, we are called to be converting communities, then it should not be an unusual experience to call a non-believer to believe in and follow the Lord Jesus. Rather they are joining with us in what is normative for a follower of Jesus, that is, a life of change "transformed by the renewing of your mind". We are inviting non-believers to be changed by entering into a community where change is the norm. We are inviting them into a place where God is actively shifting priorities, behaviors, lifestyles,

attitudes, relationships and bringing about a new way of life in everyone who is present. A life of conversion should seem both wonderfully secure and joyfully tumultuous all at the same time.

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As “ambassadors for Christ” we declare the need for a decision to be made. Being transformed requires a decision to acquiescence to the work of the Spirit in us and to commit to following Jesus where and in what manner he goes. Though the very ability to say “yes” to the Spirit’s work is God’s grace, obedience to his commands is a response of our will. Obedience requires a decision, and a decision requires someone to ask for it, for a change in direction, for a new life to replace the old.

The two main challenges ahead of us are clear. The first is that we as followers of Jesus must experience the active and on-going presence of the transforming God in our lives. To effectively enable another to take a step of faith, whether a first step or a progressive step along the way of discipleship, we must be engaged with God in Jesus in a significant way. Secondly, we must also believe that what has been possible for us is possible for others not yet in God’s

kingdom. We too often suffer from a lack of faith in God's ability to act in the life of someone else. This may be because we haven't felt a powerful change in ourselves. Perhaps we have never personally walked with a non-Christian into belief in Jesus. Or perhaps we have seen someone turn away from faith and grown cynical about the process of conversion.

Whatever our cause for doubt, we must simultaneously advance three things if we are to be communities that have serious impact for the gospel in our campus worlds:

1. We must be discipling staff, student and faculty believers into an ever deepening relationship with Christ (life-long conversions), a relationship that both frees them to be more wholly themselves and that calls them to an ever more radical obedience to his will.
2. We must be engaging the secular community in effectively explaining what it is we are doing (conversion) and who we are doing it for and with.
3. We must be actively inviting skeptics and seekers to take steps of faith (decisions) to believe in Jesus and change their allegiance to him.

Simple cultural loyalty the Christian way is not enough. Nor is organizational commitment to a Christian group. It is not enough to help students and faculty on our campuses develop a more positive orientation to Christianity. We must be communities of faith, engaged with the living God and experiencing the dynamic power of his presence in us, and inviting the rest of our campuses to join us in the process. Our commitment to conversion is not a commitment to a particular style of evangelism. Nor is it a rejection of interactive relationships with those who do not believe as we do. Nor is it a move toward manipulative attitudes of persuasion. Rather, a commitment to be converting communities is a commitment to the deepest reality of what it means to follow Jesus and pursue that commitment on our secularizing campuses. It is a commitment to engage with the Lord Jesus and to be willing partners in his radical transformational ministry.

"We are," Paul says, "ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God." May we all live out that exciting identity in Jesus individually and corporately as Christ's communities on campus.

## **NOTES**

1. Stott, John R.W. Basic Christianity, Downers Grove, Ill., IVP
2. Mark 8
3. Phil 2, Eph 6, Rom 12
4. Mark 8
5. Phil 2, Eph 6, Rom 12
6. "Our vision is to see campuses renewed, students and faculty transformed, world changers developed" IVCF's national vision statement
7. Matthew 28:19, NRSV
8. 2 Cor. 5:11
9. 2 Cor. 5:18
10. 2 Cor. 5:22
11. 2 Cor 5:20
12. Romans 12:1-2
13. 2 Cor 5:20
14. 2 Cor 5:20



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