

This Thinksheet is a bookreview essay nudged into being yesterday by the mail-arrival, as a gift from the author, of Robert O. Ferm ("With Caroline M. Whiting"), BILLY GRAHAM: DO THE CONVERSIONS LAST? (World Wide Publications, 1303 Hennepin Avenue, Minn., MN 55403), with this penning on the titlepage: "To my long time friend, Willis. You had an important role in bringing this book to completion. I value your friendship. / In Jesus, Bob Ferm, 1Peter 3:15." My role was trivial. In his N.Carolina home I inquired when this study by the most knowledgeable person was to appear; Bob said he needed an editor; I suggested Caroline, and she accepted. She's the eldest of Francis & Luella Whiting; Francis, my best friend these 54 years. The Whitings, Bob & Lois Ferm, & I were graduated from college together ½ century ago. Lois (Billy's archivist & librarian) & I were born the same night in the same hospital &, skipping the same semesters, were graduated together from K-12 as well as college. More than ½ century ago I preached rather often in Bob's church; he was my second best friend in college. On the program committee for the 1966 Triennial of the National Council of Churches, I promoted Billy's addressing that body, among whose members were many with allergies to mass evangelism in general & a Southern Baptist evangelist in particular (the Southern Baptist Convention not been then, or ever, a member of the NCC). It was agreed that Billy speak if the program included a contra-speech--so that, as it were, the NCC would be seen as greeting him with one hand & holding up the other in the "Stop!" gesture & if I would agree to be that speaker--which I did, and which I was, & for which the conservative religious press, not being privy to the inside story, roasted me....Yes, more personals that you wanted. But for reading this Thinksheet, it should help to know that my life has been woven in & out & around the subject & the subjects, ie, the dramatis personae; & that my own Christian conversion, 22 Mar 35, has lasted quite a while. (The book's dedicatory: "To Lois, my wife, who made this book happen.")....* In many capacities, Bob worked with Billy almost from the very beginning of Billy's ministry--as a scholar (including data-gatherer & interpreter), teacher, preacher, trainer of pastors in evangelism--eventually some 45,000 of them 'round the world. These books of his are important resources for the study of evangelism in general & of Billy's phenomenal ministry in particular: COOPERATIVE EVANGELISM (Zondervan/58), PERSUADED TO LIVE (Revell/58), &--most important for this Thinksheet--THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN CONVERSION (Revell/59).

1. This revisit to rebornness, rebirth, born-again-ness, new birth, birth from above can't be, for me, without nostalgia, remembrance, me-as-case personal witnessing. The birth analogy (John 3) is important in my case. I've just reviewed my diaries of the year before 22 Mar 35; the year felt maieutic: I was being brought to second birth by the Socratic midwifery of the Spirit, the church, and the world. The hundreds of pages for that year are as much on what was going on inside me as out--good case-materials if I can manage any objectivity up out of the downdraft of narcissism!

2. Almost everybody's startingline, in studying conversion, is Wm. James' THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE (1902). Reattending to it in the light of my case, I conclude that during my rebirthing year (ages 16-17, roughly the lifestage apex for conversions), I was (James' terms) **both** once-born "healthy" & twice-born "sick." My religion (Ferm, 116f, for James) "consisted of a perpetual optimism and growth in insight and understanding," but also I "could not easily throw off the burden of the consciousness of evil" & was a "continuous sufferer from its presence." Psychology then & now, tempted to represent itself as the successor to religion (parading itself as a science, demeaning religion as superstition), as "psychotherapy" represents itself as the cure for religion as a disease. Ergo, if you get converted, that's proof you're sick & need conversion to what psychology/psychotherapy offers, viz, "healthymindedness." James is more nuanced than that, but more than anyone else he's responsible for giving conversion that bad rap. But elsewhere (244, Ferm 123), James speaks of "the admirable congruity of Protestant theology with the structure of the mind as shown in such experiences." The human mind experiences, in both world & self, something wonderfully right (which we can respond to with eagerness & joy) & something woefully wrong (which we sense a call to set ourselves against, to be "converted" from). The birth analogy fits the feel of the first; the turning (Latin, *con-versio*, [literally] "turning around," so also "complete change") analogy fits the feel of the second.

3. Is Christian conversion supernatural? Also natural, & it illumines the soul to see that what we all call the natural is also supernatural. At the U. of Chicago I took E.E.Aubrey's "The Natural & the Supernatural," & that brilliant British theologian began with this: "Take the first two weeks to write a paper defining 'nature'." Well, if you've never tried it, take ten minutes for it now. It's something "everybody knows," but how unsimple it is when you find inescapable

the antonymic-genetic question, the question what it isn't! Consider, too, the existential blurring--eg, in that birthing-turning year of mine. I was utterly fascinated by "nature" (president of the highschool science club; attending science lectures at the university & the museum of science; lecturing on spectroscopy & the construction of scientific apparatus; working in my physicochemical laboratory toward discoveries & inventions) but equally fascinated by "supernature" (God, the soul, "spiritual things"--private daily devotions, an average of six attendances per week at religious events [worships; lectures by famous religious leaders; prayermeetings; spiritual-emphasis weeklong evening services in my mainline church; "revival" services in a fundamentalist church; "campmeeting" services], private conversations with my pastor & other religious leaders, involving my friends in these religious exposures as well as in my scientific pursuits, teaching church-school, & God-centered training of recruits for the Boy Scout troop).....At this point I reviewed my copy of Bob's PCC, studied when he gave it to me soon after its publication, & came upon this passage (p.230), with "conversion is natural" & "a supernatural operation" as underlinings: Conversion is natural, if by this one means that it is consistent with man's constitution to experience it. If, however, one must go beyond man to find sufficient cause for the transformation of personality through the decisive act of faith--and one must, for it is the activity of the Holy Spirit--then conversion is a supernatural operation. When conversion is artificially stimulated, it is man reacting according to his nature and constitution, without apprehending God through Christ. When conversion is the entrance into new life--that is, when the divine life has been infused into the personality and a new organizing force and integrating principle have been provided--then, and only then, does faith grip the revealed Word; then, and only then, is the conversion a commitment, not to any ideology, but to the Divine personality, even Jesus Christ...."

4. **Wholeness** has characterized every evangelist I've found appealing & persuasive. Eg, Ed Ham, under whom Billy was converted; & Ernest G. Crabill, under whom I was converted; & blind W.D.Kallenbach, whose jagged signature is in my copy (first edition, Revell/09) of Harold Begbie's TWICE-BORN MEN: A CLINIC IN REGENERATION--A Footnote in Narrative to "Wm. James' VARIETIES, which came out seven years earlier (HB's dedication is "To William James, Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University, with admiration and respect"). How different all these men I've known & read of from the televangelistic halfmen! And how different from all Elmer-Gantry ego-tripping frauds! (NB: The worse the televangelist, the better Billy the tent-evangelist looks. I'm not surprised that the answer to Bob's title-question in his latest book is "yes": the BG Crusades conversions do last, roughly 80% of them.)....My diary two days before my conversion has this: "This evangelist does not make a strong appeal to the emotions, as many evangelists do." But wholeness was coming at me from many directions, including my daily readings in Scripture & in stacks of religious classics. ...I've been talking about the wholeness of the worthy & convincing messenger, who combines (to use three catchy Greek words) character ($\eta\theta\omicron\varsigma$) with reason ($\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$) & appropriate feeling ($\pi\acute{\alpha}\theta\omicron\varsigma$).

5. But wholeness must be also of the message. God's Good News in & through Jesus suffers from the inadequacy, in each instance of presentation, both of messenger & of encoded/decoded message (ie, what's "sent" & what's "heard"). Some more than others are gifted-&-called to be messengers, & they can develop their gift & improve their message. The burden of my NCC confrontation with Billy at the Miami Beach triennium 6f Dec 66 (my NCC paper, "Beyond the Old and the New Evangelism") was toward his helping, from his position of eminence on the individual-"soul" side, to heal the split between the self-concern (escaping hell, getting my soul to heaven) of his message & the society-concern of "the movements" then tearing at the fabric & confinements of American life, movements in most of which I was a committed participant both out of personal Christian conviction & as a minister in & through the national offices of the United Church of Christ. The devil was dividing & conquering by hubris & hypertrophy: in the former, **narcissistic** escape from society into the myth of "the individual" as an abstract from community; in the latter, **socialistic** escape from self-confrontation in the presence of God. I soon followed (29 July - 4 Aug, 1967) with five NCC lectures (Ecumenical Evangelism Conference, Green Lake, WIS) on "Conversion, Today, to God and His Kingdom."

6. To use the subtitle of this Thinksheet, I've been revisiting rebornness ever since it happened to me--including rereading a number of times, for self-examination face to face with God, of the diary materials immediately preceding & succeeding 22 Mar 35. As now, for this Thinksheet, I review said paper & said lectures, I have in mind showing their pertinence & intent & general content (as they never have been published except, when given, in mimeo). ["Beyond the Old and the New Evangelism," 20pp. 2-column single-spaced, is Thinksheet #67; "The Use of the Bible in the New Age," the preface to "Conversion, Today, to God and His Kingdom," is 8½pp. 2-column single-spaced & is Thinksheet #5.]

....BTOATNE: Before addressing the NCC Assembly, Billy commented to his staff that I must really have wanted him to know ahead of time what I was going to be saying: I'd sent several copies to him by various routes. Indeed, I did! I was interested in witnessing to him. (And not in publicity: I did not precis my remarks for the press, nor appear at the press conference to which I was invited: Harvey Cox took my place. But the NYTimes & some other papers picked up quotes from my paper.) First sentence: "Jesus makes himself one with the world's wounds. These wounds, his and the world's, are the only context for proclaiming and understanding the text of the Word which he is and brings." I recall Bp. Lance Webb sitting in the front row & writing that sentence, but this is what he was to quote in his WHEN GOD COMES ALIVE Through the Spirit-Renewed Church (Abingdon/68, p.156): The heart of our holy heritage is a story about the Holy Love, source of all life, that became a Jew. We killed him, but he didn't stay dead, and is with us now and will be at the end of this age....In short, the words of this story...and the wounds of the world are meant for each other; and evangelism is the process through which God enables the world, through us who believe this good news, to understand its wounds through Christ's wounds and its opportunities through Christ's resurrection....[Therefore] it is inauthentic to be a partisan of the words without wounds or a partisan of wounds without the word, to exalt the voice above the deed, or the act above the telling, to separate--by use or by disuse--the larynx from the rest of the incarnate reality. Of course, there are times that call for the silent act, and times that call for the simple word, but witness is normally both, each reinforcing the other. Vance continues: "This basic understanding of the source of the new creation is essential for adopting any kind of worthy evangelism, and the principle thus enunciated will help us to avoid either extreme which in other times has cancelled the evangel." On the same p. he quotes Bp. Lesslie Newbigin at the Triennium: "There are two heresies in relation to Christian evangelism: giving a cup of cold water without the Name, and naming the Name without the deed." Lance's own definition of evangelism (p.145): "Christian evangelism at its best is the glorious work of leading people to meet, worship, love, and obey the gracious God who through Christ is alive and at work in human history and experience" (all ital.)....My NCC "commission" on the occasion was "to establish a polar position for dialog with the old evangelism as represented by Billy Graham" (dialog in small groups after my "position paper"). (Ironical misperception: The editor of THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY said to me, "Willis, I'd like to publish your paper, but interest is too low: the old evangelism is dead, and our readers would accuse us of beating a dead horse." At the time, the CENTURY was pushing the opposite "heresy," to use Newbigin's word.)....My opening Scripture paraphrase of Jn.20:24-26 was this: "The believers say, 'We have seen the Lord!' The world says, 'Unless I see the wounds, I will not believe.'" Much later, Henri Nouwen developed this theme into a little classic, THE WOUNDED HEALER....I attacked the "fraudulent debate in which ideological hardening occurs through the polarization of wound and word. Yet just such a debate is now going on in the world Church between the verbalists (who ran the Berlin [World] Congress [on Evangelism, earlier that year] independently of existing ecumenical fellowship) and the actionists (whose fascination at "being where the action is" strongly tempts to the neglect of the Word, to righteous alibis for not telling the Story, and to disdain for those believers who at all times and places seek openings for "naming the Name"). I had to distance myself from the new as well as the old evangelism. "I am an orthodox believer; in attitudes, a liberal; in social, economic, and political matters, a radical." I saw the polarized ideologues as failing to meet "the plastic reality of current situations of witness" & as "prostituting to strifeful energies which should be used in the authentic dialog of mutual correction and mutual seeking of the real questions and of appropriate responses."

A high concern of my paper was the function of the **Bible** in conversion. There's a difference between being converted to the Biblical "way of seeing, & living in, the world" (to use my subsequent definition of a religion), this world, on the one hand &, on the other, being converted into the Biblical world (which what I called "scribal evangelicalism" tends to do). (Fosdick called the latter "being more interested in the Philistines than in your neighbors"; & I heard a social-gospel founder, Shailer Mathews, call it "becoming a contemporary ancestor.") "The scribal mentality" (which was a factor in Jesus' rejection and death) takes the sacred text "more seriously than the living context within and beyond the community. The text is held so close to the eyes" as to produce a self-inflicted cataract; what is seen around the edges of the text, "in the world," "must be shaped into conformity with the text." Scribal Bible-study is not Biblical but biblicistic, beginning-continuing-ending with the Bible. The myopia of holding the Bible blindingly close is the equal & opposite sin from keeping the Bible so far away you can't read it. To change the figure, the old evangelism's overeating on Scripture can't cure the new evangelism's malnutrition. "The Bible says" has both the authoritarian's persuasive certainty & the antiquarian's pungent smell, & I'm allergic to both. Further, this idolatrous overattention to Scripture falls into the inerrantist trap: the god is perfect, therefore errorless, therefore guarded against normal critical consciousness by the taboo of blasphemy. (No wonder CHRISTIANITY TODAY & other rightwing religious periodicals reacted to my paper as to blasphemy!) In contrast, our Lord says (Mt.15:2) we are to use treasures "new and old," so we are to correct for ideological distortions & "use the total resources of nature, history, and grace without prejudice for old or new but with openness to truth and love." Any infallibilism is a promethean overclaim of access to the Truth, a violation of creatureliness, & an intrusion into divine territory (in the name of revelation, of course!). In contrast, the servant of the Word prays & studies to avoid the errors of the scribes (bibliolatry, blindness to what is not in Scripture, disproportionate attention to what's in Scripture, prejudicial distortion of what's in Scripture, system-building alien to the Spirit-spirit of Scripture, & eisegesis of foreign matter into Scripture).

....TUOTBITNA: This preface to my NCC lectures on conversion is concerned with what is also the main burden of my Triennium paper, viz, how the **Bible** gets used in communicating toward conversion "in the new age" (meaning here & now, not "New Age" as a subsequent description of one contemporary consciousness and subculture). "A style of life appropriate to the Christian in this new age" has, as one essential characterisitc, "**freedom in, from, and through the Bible.**" How are we, here & now, to use Scripture "in worship, study, service, and witness"? We need "a new freedom to respond to the Word of God, that is, to what God in each situation asks of" us. Here are "clues": (1) "The Bible is worthy of, and should get, the convert's daily attention...."(2) "The Bible, more than any other book, is worthy of and should get minimal and maximal attention"--ie, "painstaking critical attention..., striving for...objectivity"; & letting the Bible you're trying to master, master you ("soaking oneself in Scripture so that the Spirit can use the biblical images and ideas beyond the minimal meaning of texts"). "Critically I am bound to the text, but transcritically I am set free through the text and even from the text" as I "daily bind myself to Christ through it."....(3) The holy Literature & the common life are to be taken with equal seriousness so that "discerning and doing the will of God" is doubly contextual. To believe things only because they are in the Bible is idolatry, specifically, bibliolatry....(4) "We cannot abide scribal constriction to what the Bible teaches and how it teaches it." We must be "honest both about what is in Scripture and about what we are convinced should be in our hearts."....(5) "The authority of the Bible should be for us...'alongside' rather than...'over.'" Little can be proved from Scripture, and everything should be proved (ie, tested) by Scripture."....(6) "The Bible is the one book which should and must be used both for self-examination and for brotherly criticism."....(7) "Because the Bible is....future-oriented, we enter its heart only through...our hopes and fears."....(8) "Propositionalism is a snare and a Greeky perversion."....(9) In this new age, the Bible must be spoken, not just quoted....(10) The new understanding of language-communication should free us to feel afresh the force of Scripture.

(note.) Bp. Lance Webb
Abingdon / 1968

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words we use to describe our experience and to meanings we have found in them.⁸

ence, to say "God is love" is to use descriptive words people have heard the words many times without understanding them. To say these same words from our experience is much more likely to influence our listeners to hear and understand, but still not fully without the affective language of our lives. The most fundamental part of evangelism is the ability to love and be loved, and this ability to give love to others comes from knowing that God loves. The parables of Jesus, parables are our acts, which illustrate the truth of our message.)

The words of Stephen as well as the Word of his preaching, as the stones pelted off his head, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," sin to their charge." It was this combined truth and word of life that captured Paul. In his preaching words and acts Paul confronted the love of God and could never get away from it! It was a powerful impact which only came to a climax on the Damascus road. A thousand times he had asked himself, "Where is the love he had seen in Stephen and his fellow believers which they credited to the love of their Master?" The answer they claimed was seen the eternal Spirit of God. Was this loving Spirit really the love of God? The experience climaxed in the Damascus road with this first question, "Who are you, Lord?" The answer came, "I am the Lord, whom you are persecuting." From that hour on, the love of God became the single dominating motive, which he describes in 1 Corinthians:

If Christ leaves us no choice. . . . God . . . has reconciled himself to himself through Christ, and he has enlisted

ed to Dr. Thomas Bennett, Dean of Roger Williams University, for the differentiation of these three kinds of language.

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us in this service of reconciliation. What I mean is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself . . . and that he has entrusted us with the message of reconciliation. We come therefore as Christ's ambassadors . . . appealing to you . . . be reconciled to God! (II Cor. 5:14-20 NEB.)

This experience with the early church in Jerusalem and later in Damascus and, afterward, three years of withdrawal in Arabia in which he confronted the love of Christ in his own experience, marked the beginning of the new creation in Saul, who for that reason changed his name to Paul.

And so it has always been! Life begets life, fire produces fire spiritually and physically. Love begets love. In acts of caring love we multiply the fire. And when the caring love is seen to be no accidental sentiment but a revelation of cosmic reality, then indeed the fire burns in intelligent meaning, with hope and courage and joy for great living. That is to say, the love must be accompanied by the faith that makes the love more than a chance sentiment. The loving acts must be interpreted by the good news of the gospel in intelligent words that make the meaning of these acts understood. The one is helpless without the other. The words, without the acts of Christlike, caring love to interpret, are vain mockery. The acts of Christlike, caring love, without the background and interpretation of intelligent faith, become interesting and touching episodes in the flux of meaninglessness and lovelessness that may so easily be seen as nullifying and destroying it.

A strange but unnecessary conflict has been raging between those who favor the "old" over the "new" evangelism, or vice versa, between the "verbalists" and the "actionists." This conflict was brought into the open in the section meetings on "Evangelism: Crisis and Opportunity" at the Assembly of the National Council of Churches meeting in Miami, December, 1966. Bishop Lesslie Newbigin,

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participating on a panel which included both sides, pointed out that it is not either action or words but both. "It is true we have mouthed a great deal of words without action," he said, "but we must have more than action—we must also have the intelligible words." He went on to say that "there are two heresies in relation to Christian evangelism: giving a cup of cold water without the Name, and naming the Name without the deed."

> Willis Elliot summarized the necessity to go "Beyond the 'Old' and the 'New' Evangelism."

Elliot saw the author underline this.

The heart of our holy heritage is a story about the Holy Love, source of all life, that became a Jew. We killed him, but he didn't stay dead, and is with us now and will be at the end of this age. . . . In short, the words of this story . . . and the wounds of the world are meant for each other; and evangelism is the process through which God enables the world, through us who believe this good news, to understand its wounds through Christ's wounds and its opportunities through Christ's resurrection. . . . [Therefore] it is inauthentic to be a partisan of the word without wounds or a partisan of wounds without the word, to exalt the voice above the deed, or the act above the telling, to separate—by use or by disuse—the larynx from the rest of the incarnate reality. Of course, there are times that call for the silent act, and times that call for the simple word, but witness is normally both, each reinforcing the other.⁹

This basic understanding of the source of the new creation is essential for adopting any kind of worthy evangelism, and the principle thus enunciated will help us to avoid either extreme which in other times has cancelled the evangel.

What can we in the church, as the people of God and as individual members of it, do that will confront those

⁹From an address available through the Department of Evangelism, National Council of Churches.

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about us with the love of God in Christ, in deed and word, so that many will understand and accept it?

First of all, we can worship in adoration, praise, thanksgiving, in humble confession and wholehearted dedication; and in this worship we can proclaim the word of life so genuinely and effectively that those who, like Saul, witness our worship may hear that word and meet the love of Christ in the Holy Spirit. It was the reality of Stephen's worship as he died, his loving intercession for those who stoned him, that declared the word most effectively to Saul. It was the affective language of my mother's worship that led me to consider and accept the reality of God's love in my own life. It was the worship of the early Christians, such as Stephen and Polycarp, in the arena of action that communicated the reality of the love of Christ for whom they were willing to die.

We underestimate the power of great worship as a method of evangelism; surely the renewal of the church's worship is the first necessity for a renewal of the church's evangelism. Stephen's prayer was a genuine commitment of love and concern that rose above his own threatened pain and death. It is still true that the affective communication of the loving presence by a great hymn, sung by those who have experienced its truth, is often an open door for the Spirit to make the evangel known, for hymns are testimonies of experience—not only the so-called "gospel hymns" that sing the gospel, but the great hymns of the church which declare the writer's and the singer's faith in majestic music.

For instance, some of us have heard Herbert Gezork, retired president of Andover Newton Theological School, tell of the time when he was ready to turn his back on all Christian faith. As a young theological student in Germany during the rise of Hitler, he had been too outspoken and was forced to flee the country. One rainy night in Ham-