



CHAPTER NINETEEN

How Pseudo Conversions Hinder Evangelism

Spiritual giant **A.W. Tozer** believed that millions of people have had some kind of spiritual experience, even accepting Jesus, but have not actually been saved.¹ Similarly, **George Barna** claims that half of all adults who attend Protestant churches on a typical Sunday morning are not Christian.² Pseudo converts – people who are not truly saved – are contributing to the decline of evangelism in the West.

Why some people come to church...

People may join a church to improve or change their lifestyle, or for a new set of friends. They may want to cure loneliness or find a new family. They may want to be accepted, healed from hurts or addictions, and so on. It's quite legitimate to join the church (small "c") for these reasons,³ because often people "connect" before they convert. One of our aims ought to be to bring non-Christians to church to meet other Christians, so that they can observe and sense what God is doing as He works powerfully through His people.

1 Cited in Kirk Cameron and Ray Comfort. *The Way Of The Master: How To Share Your Faith Simply, Effectively, Biblically... The Way Jesus Did*. Tyndale Books, 2003, p.66

2 George Barna. *Evangelism That Works*. Regal Books, 1995, p.38

3 After all, Jesus did say. "Come to Me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).



To lull leaders into thinking the majority of people in church are already genuine Christians.

The trouble is, according to Barna and Tozer at least, many are connecting to the small “c” church, but not enough are converting to the capital “C” Church which is the body of Christ. These pseudo converts who connect but don’t convert have three standout characteristics: they come not to serve but to be served; they take but don’t give; “self” still rules, not Jesus. Their hearts have never been changed. Jesus is on the periphery, rather than at the centre of their lives.

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Since they have not been born again, they are not indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Thus their minds are not set on Jesus, His kingdom or His purposes. Given that genuine spiritual fruitfulness

“It requires selfless giving for His glory.”



is inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit, how can we expect pseudo converts to enter into God’s ultimate cause – the evangelisation of the earth? Such work is hard, gruelling and humbling (John 4:38).⁴ It requires selfless giving for His glory.

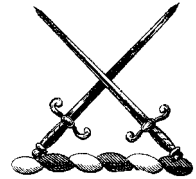
How do pseudo converts hinder evangelism...?

First, they discourage the evangelists. One aspect of the mandate of the Ephesians 4:11-12 evangelist is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry,” but pseudo converts show no

⁴ The Greek word here in John 4:38 for “labour” is *kenokopeo* which means “to grow weary, tired, exhausted with toil or burdens or grief.” This speaks of what it is going to cost every true disciple who desires to evangelise the world.

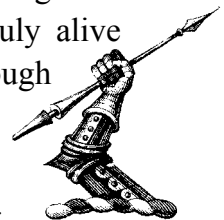
interest in being trained for evangelism.⁵ Secondly, they have a negative influence on genuine Christians. Here's how:

- New converts, who are genuinely saved, join a church.
- They have a passion for evangelism.
- They don't realise that not everyone in the church they join is genuinely Christian.
- They soon observe that many people in the church they join don't share their passion for evangelism.
- The enthusiasm of the new converts for evangelism continues for a while because their fresh experience of salvation is just so fantastic that they can't keep quiet about it!
- But over time, even genuine converts will be worn down, subconsciously doubting the universal command of Jesus to evangelise the earth.
- Many will drop out of evangelism because they have become used to flying under the influence of the non-evangelising pseudo converts.



Getting the priceless buzz...

The overall effect of the pseudo converts on evangelism is this: they have a significant “dulling down” influence on the entire evangelistic zeal of a local church, and hinder the development of a culture of evangelism in a local church⁶ more than you might think. In contrast, the following describes a local church with a thriving culture of evangelism. Imagine arriving at church on Sunday when all the people have been busy evangelising all week. Many have brought non-Christians, and they are truly alive because they have seen and felt God at work through them as they evangelised. They are exchanging stories of evangelism encounters, and those who have experienced disappointment are being encouraged.



5 This is not saying that anyone who shows no interest in being trained for evangelism is not genuinely saved. Genuine Christians who show no interest in being equipped for evangelism can do so for a variety of reasons – all the reasons uncovered in this book. For example, they might have genuinely thought they were already doing it; or they might sincerely have thought that it was someone else's responsibility i.e. the person with 'the gift.'

6 See appendix eight for a brief discussion about creating a church with a culture of evangelism.

All the pray-ers in the church are excited because they are seeing results.

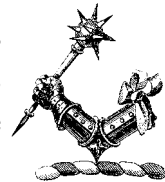
The pastor is on fire because the people arrive excited and expectant. No “warm up” period is necessary— they come red hot. The worship rises to a new level because the people are overflowing with praise and worship. The overall “buzz” is priceless. The offerings are generous because nothing causes people to buy into a vision of a local church more than an evangelism strategy *that involves them directly* and is bearing fruit. These offerings go to fund further evangelism training and resources. How long do you think pseudo converts would survive in a local church like this?

But there is a third way pseudo converts hinder evangelism. Occasionally they slip into church leadership, where they have greater influence. Here they do the most damage. Unwittingly they begin to teach their non-evangelising lifestyle to the flock.⁷ What a perfect result for the devil. There are several positive steps we can take to improve this situation.

How superficial altar calls hinder evangelism...

We can reduce the number of psuedo converts if we eliminate what I call “superficial altar calls.” Let me explain.

When I run seminars on evangelism, I ask those attending to draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. On one side, as a heading, I ask them to write **Jesus As Saviour**. Under this I ask them to list all the benefits of becoming a Christian. Their lists include things such as love, joy, eternal life, the gift of the Holy Spirit, hope, forgiveness, healing, miracles, blessing, and so on. Then I ask them to imagine a “saviour-only” altar call at an evangelistic meeting. The evangelist is at the front and there is a sense of God’s presence. The people are expectant, as the preacher calls for every head to be bowed and every eye closed. He exhorts the Christians to pray.



7 This is not saying that everyone who feels fearful about evangelism or perceives it as threatening and demanding is a pseudo convert. Genuine Christians can have these perceptions and feel these fears. The difference is that true Christians feel deeply the need to proclaim the gospel and they want others to feel the same way. If they knew how to overcome their fears and inadequacies towards evangelism, they would. Pseudo converts, however, not having the mind of Christ, nor being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, don't have a genuine heart for any of this.

“I know there are people here that once knew the Lord,” he says, “but you have drifted away. God is calling you back. And there are people that have never made a decision for Jesus. God is calling you. If you are a person who has known the Lord and you want to come back or you want to make a decision for the first time, slip up your hand right now. If you want eternal life, forgiveness, hope and joy [or some of the other benefits listed above], then slip your hand up right now.”



Praise God, I see that hand! And that one! And that one! God is really moving here tonight! Come on saints, keep praying.”

After several minutes, the altar call comes to a close.

Then: “I want everyone to stand please. Praise God. We’ve had about 20 people put up their hands tonight. Let’s give the Lord a clap offering to thank Him for what He has done! Now, just as the musicians continue to play, I don’t want to embarrass anyone but I want those 20 people to come out to the front. Okay, I want you to say this prayer after me. And let’s all say it together, church.

“Dear Lord Jesus, I am sorry for what I have done. I want You to forgive me. Please come into my heart right now and bring your peace and joy. I want to be a Christian. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.”

Everybody claps enthusiastically. “Hasn’t this been wonderful?” continues the evangelist. “Now I want all those new Christians to slip out the back and we’ll give you a little follow-up pack. Praise the Lord!”

How to tell who is genuinely saved on an altar call...

Please don’t misinterpret what I am saying here. I don’t mean to mock or criticise but this is important. As an evangelist I have given many altar calls like the one I have just described. I don’t do altar calls like that anymore, because now I know better. My earnest desire with this discussion is to increase the effectiveness and fruitfulness of your ministry. Let me ask you a question. Those 20 people all said the same prayer, but which ones were converted?



Actually, we don’t know. A little prayer does not save someone. It could, but it depends on what is going on in the heart and we can’t



see in there.

There are only two ways of knowing whether someone is converted. The first is to look at the pattern of their life post-conversion. A transformed life is evidence that the prayer prayed at that altar call was genuine. The second way is to interview the people who responded to the altar call. After affirming their decision to respond to the call, I would ask them the following questions in an encouraging, loving, non-threatening way:



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- 1 Why did you come to the front tonight?
- 2 Are you really ready to follow this radical, loving, caring person called Jesus?
- 3 Do you believe Jesus died on the cross for you personally, to take the punishment you deserve for your law-breaking?
- 4 Do you believe Jesus will freely forgive you if you sincerely turn to Him in faith and ask Him?
- 5 Did you realise that becoming a Christian is both an event and a life-long journey?
- 6 Did you realise that it’s following a person and building a close, deep relationship with Him?
- 7 Are you open to inviting Him to change you into the person He wants you to be, even if the change can sometimes be painful?
- 8 Are you willing to serve Him and His purposes on the earth? Have you thought about how being a Christian could be tough? How would you handle this?
- 9 Are you ready to surrender unconditionally to Him and to follow Him?
- 10 Have you thought about how this decision you are wanting to make will change your life?

In a loving way, I would invite discussion and try to create an atmosphere of openness and honesty. If some of the altar call

respondents then said they were not ready to become Christians after the discussion, I would affirm their honesty and then commit to journey with them to bring them to that point. Bringing them to the point of conversion might take days, weeks, months or even years.



What is genuine faith...?

Some Christians might object to the idea of questioning people at an altar call, or the “inquiry room,” as Spurgeon called it. “This is far too clinical,” they might say. “Becoming a Christian is not mentally assenting to a whole lot of facts. It’s a matter of faith in the heart about Jesus!” What are we to make of this? Is becoming a Christian a head and heart issue, or a heart issue only? The *This We Believe* signatories⁸ made the following affirmation: “We affirm that faith includes mental assent to the content of the gospel, acknowledgement of our own sin and need, and personal trust and reliance upon Christ and His work. We deny that saving faith includes *only* mental acceptance of the gospel, and that justification is secured by a mere outward profession of faith. We further deny that any element of saving faith is a meritorious work or earns salvation for us.”⁹ Summary: becoming a Christian ought to be a heart *and* a head issue.

How to improve the retention rate of those who respond...

I have found that since I have been interviewing those who respond to the altar call, not telling them they are Christians just because they said a quick prayer at the altar, the fall-off rate following altar calls has dramatically decreased. At one altar call I did recently, 20 people responded initially, but, after the following interview, only six were ready to follow through and become Christians at that meeting. The other fourteen were quite happy to journey with the pastor and church leaders so that one day they too

8 A landmark conference was held in 2000, and attended by 229 top Christian leaders, authors, and theologians. They produced a series of affirmations and denials regarding the gospel and evangelism. A full list of signatories is detailed in appendix five.

9 Ravi Zacharias et al. *This We Believe. The Good News Of Jesus Christ For The World*. Zondervan Publishing House, 2000, p.120



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could come to the place where they were ready to commit sincerely to Christ. But here’s the thing: had I told those fourteen people they were Christians, before they were ready, it is likely I would simply have inoculated them against genuine faith. I would have effectively created more pseudo converts.

On the subject of ascribing salvation to anyone who puts their hand up at an altar call and announces they are a Christian, **Spurgeon** wrote: “I am weary of this public bragging, this counting of unhatched chickens, this exhibition of doubtful spoils. Lay aside such numbering of the people, such idle pretence of certifying in half a minute that which will need the testing of a lifetime.”¹⁰

How to give new Christians the best possible start...

Those who “convert” to Christianity knowing the *benefits* but not the *cost* of discipleship, have never heard the full gospel. As such, they are prime candidates for the ranks of the pseudo converts. Too many people have entered the church on this kind of altar call.

Please don’t misunderstand me. As I have said, I’m not against altar calls. I continue to use them when preaching and encourage others to use them. We have all witnessed how powerfully God has used the altar call. But let’s give non-Christians time to think about



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Charles Spurgeon.

the responsibilities before they make the decision to commit. These days at an altar call I am cautious about telling anyone straight away that he or she is now a Christian. I prefer to say something like, “Your coming to the front is an indication of your desire to become a Christian. This is wonderful. But before you make your final decision, we want to ask you some questions to make sure you have the best possible start to your Christian life.”

I use the follow-up booklet called *‘How To Be Sure Of Going To Heaven At Death’*¹¹ which has been designed for this very situation. *Christianity Explained* and *Alpha* are also excellent courses for prospective Christians. Even if we think they are ready to become Christians at the altar, and some undoubtedly will be, we ought to err on the side of caution, giving them time to process the implications of their decision and count the cost.

Some may protest, “What happens if they die between the altar call and the time they finally make a decision?” It doesn’t matter.¹² God sees the heart. If they really were converted at that altar call, God knew it and they would certainly go to heaven.

It is okay to “connect” before “converting”...

Sometimes leaders will preach a powerful sermon and give an



“...*Let’s give non-Christians time to think about the responsibilities before they make the decision to commit.*”

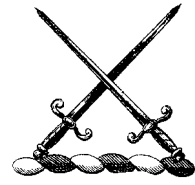
altar call for salvation at the end, but the gospel has not been communicated. What are we to make of this? I suggest there is a better way. Yes, have an altar call after a powerful “non-gospel message” like this, but don’t make it a call for salvation. It would be better to say something like, “If God has touched you through this message, and you would like prayer and ministry, I want you to come to the front now where I can pray for you...” Then after praying for the people who came to the altar, ask them if you could



11 To purchase, see our web site www.esisite.com or emailing julianbatchelor@xtra.co.nz

12 I don’t mean it doesn’t matter that they died! I mean that it doesn’t matter that they didn’t ‘say the prayer’ at the altar. The thief on the cross was another who was saved without saying ‘the prayer’.

show them a short presentation, and, if they agree, explain the gospel. If they want to become Christians after hearing it, then of course, lead them to Christ.



“All churches ought to regularly proclaim the gospel, so that those in a church who have ‘connected but not converted’ have multiple opportunities to respond and cross the line. I think this approach would help reduce the number of pseudo converts in our churches.”

If they don’t want to hear the gospel after the initial prayer at the altar, befriend them, keep in contact, and involve them in other aspects of church life. Why not pay them a visit at home to answer any questions they might have, and further develop the relationship? We ought to resist rushing people into a decision. It is better to slow

the process down a little, journey with them, and allow God to work in them to bring them to the point of genuine conversion. We want to see them develop a lasting faith. All churches ought to regularly proclaim the gospel on Sundays, so that those in a church who have “connected but not converted” have multiple opportunities to cross the line. I think this approach to ‘slowing things down a bit’ would help reduce the number of pseudo converts in our congregations.

How one pastor is making a big difference...

In Sydney, Australia, I spoke at the Petersham Assembly of God church which is pastored by Barry Saar. The ten-minute *Proclaim It!* presentation of the gospel that I showed them seemed to be the answer to a concern he had held for quite a while. He had been troubled by the high rate of pseudo conversions in our Western churches, and the low retention rate from altar calls. As Barry sees it, the Great Commission, as recorded



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in Matthew 28:18-20, speaks of our going into all the world and making ‘water-baptised’ disciples. Not being satisfied with merely getting spontaneous decisions, Barry determined to adjust the way his church was doing things. The first thing he realised was that the Petersham AOG needed to present the *whole* gospel, which included the truth about sin, hell and eternal punishment, and not just the good bits we like to hear. This brought an immediate change to their Sunday service. He and his other leaders decided that if they had not presented a clear, full presentation of the gospel in their service, then they would not have a salvation altar call. He reasoned that we cannot make a ‘complete’ convert when we only present a ‘portion’ of the gospel. This is where the *Proclaim It!* presentation presented a possible solution. Pastor Barry now concludes each service with an invitation for any person wishing to know more about becoming a Christian to attend a live presentation of *Proclaim It!* in another room after the service.¹³ What are the effects? Two are most noticeable:

An increase in the retention rate

The retention rate of people making a decision for salvation has risen. This is because he and his team have encouraged people to think the issues through carefully before committing. At Barry’s church, people who make the decision stand the test of time.

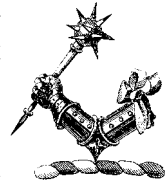
An increase in the percentage of people being baptised

When I was last speaking to Barry I asked him how things were progressing. He had great joy in telling me



13 Barry has a dream for something like the following, and would encourage you to do the same. “After every service, the senior pastor, along with other leaders, invite visitors and anyone new to the church to meet with them for a coffee and finger food. The meeting room is immediately off the main auditorium. The staff who attend these meetings have been trained for this event: interpersonal skills, how to make people feel welcome, learning to ask the right questions, etc. The room where they meet is especially equipped: stylish, warm, modern, clean and very inviting. A data projector and laptop are there, ready to present the whole gospel. After welcoming people, and chatting with them, the pastor says something like ‘Well, thank you for coming to church today, we have really appreciated that you took time out of your day to visit us. Before you go, we would like to show you a short 10 minute presentation which explains what we believe here at Petersham AOG. This presentation is a summary of this amazing book (holding up a Bible), so I hope you enjoy this.’ At the end of the presentation, the pastor invites questions, and a small pack of follow up material is given, including details of all the ministries of the church. Yes, we would expect some people to respond for salvation on the spot. All the new people who attend this meeting would be followed up during the coming week with a phone call, and where possible, a home visit.” As Barry has already explained, he has had a rough version of this dream operating at his church for some time, and it’s working. “When the funding is there,” says Barry “I will see what I envisage fulfilled.” Why don’t you follow Barry’s excellent example?

that the number of people being baptised was now almost the same as the numbers making a decision. Barry said that in 2004, before making the changes, the church baptised in water 51 percent of the people who had made a decision for salvation. About the middle of 2005, when they made the changes, the percentage rose to 82 percent. Now, in 2006, 98 percent of people who made a decision for salvation were also water-baptised. He also told me that as a result his church numbers had been increasing these past years after a long plateau. What can we conclude? First, if you want people to “stick” when they respond for salvation, make sure they do so in response to hearing the whole gospel. Secondly, don’t rush the process on the road to the point of a decision. Journey with prospective Christians and walk through their issues and questions. Thirdly, as Barry has done so successfully, make an opportunity at the end of each service for people to hear the whole gospel in a side room. Knowing this is going to happen will encourage the people in your church to bring non-Christians along. They will reason, “I really want my friends to hear the gospel. Who better to explain it to them than my awesome pastor? I am going to try and get them to church.”



How chemotherapy and the gospel are alike...

Pastor Barry gives the following analogy to describe what he is trying to do at Petersham Assembly of God. “I want to compare proclaiming the whole gospel with a dose of chemotherapy. A doctor needs to be honest about the seriousness of the disease that is bringing death to his patient, but when the patient realises there is the chance of a cure through chemotherapy, they usually agree to the treatment. Chemotherapy is good news when you realise you are dying. When the negative side-effects begin – hair falling out, loss of appetite, pain, vomiting etc – they endure because they have been told the whole truth about what to expect and what will happen if they refuse the treatment. The gospel is similar. It is Good News about how to know Jesus in this life, and how to escape eternal punishment in the next. The gospel also has difficult side-effects, such as the persecution, trials and suffering promised for followers of Jesus. However, and here is the main point, Jesus Christ, through

the *whole* gospel, will save you. This is good news. Many churches have presented only the positives of the gospel message and many ‘pseudo converts’ abandon their ‘faith’ when the promised negative side-effects begin to emerge. If the first ‘consultation’ was honest and presented the whole picture, then we would retain more of our conversions because the *whole* gospel is good news.”¹⁴

What it means to proclaim the whole gospel...

If we are to be true to the full gospel, prospective Christians must hear and understand that Jesus is *Lord*, and not just Saviour. What does it mean to make Jesus “Lord” at the point of conversion?

Consider the following diagram:

Jesus as Saviour	Jesus as Lord
The benefits of being a Christian	The responsibilities of being a Christian
Love	Serving
Joy	Giving
Peace	Loving
The gift of the Holy Spirit	Suffering
Eternal life	Forgiving
Forgiveness	Proclaiming
Destiny	Sacrificing
Hope	Caring
Etc	Etc

I ask people in my seminars on evangelism to write the words **Jesus as Lord** on the other side of the page. Under this they put a sub-heading, **Responsibilities**. Under this, I ask them to make a list of some of the responsibilities of being a Christian. They start their list with, “We are commanded to...”

What God has joined, let no man separate...

In calling people to Jesus, we must not separate the responsibilities from the benefits. At an altar call we do not have the liberty to hide the cost of following Jesus. Jesus is not just Saviour – He is also Lord. Unless someone is willing to enter into the responsibilities of being a Christian, they



¹⁴ Barry invites other pastors and leaders to email him to discuss what is happening at Petersham: barry.saar@petershamaog.org.au

will not experience the benefits. Pseudo converts don't make Jesus "Lord" and therefore they have never truly repented. *Repentance* has to do with turning away from sin and turning towards God. It has to do with adopting a whole new set of attitudes towards life, sin, God, ourselves, the Bible and Church, to name just a few. If we



"Therefore, if we want new Christians to enter a life of fruitfulness and blessing, the entry point into Christianity is very important."

thoroughly understood this word and taught it as a vital part of the full gospel, we would go a long way to reducing the number of pseudo converts. As **Dr Derek Prince** wrote, "The whole record of the New Testament is absolutely unanimous on this point ... without true repentance

there can never be true faith."¹⁵

How to bless new Christians...

When someone asks to become a Christian, they are saying, "I surrender the control of my life to Jesus. I willingly give Him control of my marriage, money, housing, food, clothing, comfort, career, and friends, etc. No matter what comes my way from now on, I will serve and obey Him with all my heart."

We are doing prospective Christians a disservice if we don't point out the cost of

discipleship. It is a spiritual law that there must be death before there can be a resurrection. Therefore, if we want new Christians to enter a life of fruitfulness and blessing, the entry point into Christianity is important.



Jesus was clear on this: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). "Those who do

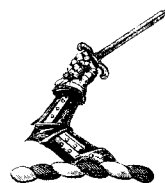


"The whole record of the New Testament is absolutely unanimous on this point ... without true repentance there can never be true faith."

Dr. Derek Prince

not take up their cross [a symbol of death] and follow Me, are not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:38).

Paul reiterates his master’s teaching by saying, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).



Listen to the experts...

Andrew Murray, the renowned Scottish missionary to South Africa, said, “Let us beware that no wrong-sided or one-sided



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Andrew Murray

view of what salvation by faith means, leads us astray. There are some who think that salvation by faith is all that’s necessary, and obedience is not so essential. This is a terrible mistake. In our justification there is indeed no thought of

obedience in the past. God justifies the ungodly. But repentance is a return to obedience. And He has no salvation but for them that obey Him.”¹⁶

“It is altogether doubtful,” said **A.W. Tozer**, “whether any man can be saved who comes to Christ for His help but with no intention to obey Him ... the notion that we are permitted to disobey is a modern day heresy.”¹⁷ Elsewhere he stated, “In every Christian’s heart there is a cross and a throne, and the Christian is on the throne till he puts himself on the cross; if he refuses the cross, he remains on the throne.”¹⁸ In fact Tozer had concerns with the whole “accept Christ” approach.



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A.W. Tozer

16 Andrew Murray. *The Holiest Of All*. Lowe and Brydone Print. London, 1962, p.193

17 A.W. Tozer. *The Root Of The Righteous*. OM Publishing, Carlisle, 1995, p.83

18 *ibid*, p.64



says. “It makes Him stand hat-in-hand awaiting our verdict on Him instead of our kneeling with troubled hearts awaiting His verdict on us. It may even permit us to accept Christ by impulse of mind or emotions, painlessly, at no loss to our ego and no inconvenience to our usual way of life.”¹⁹

We are reminded in 2 Corinthians 5:15 that “He died for all, that those who live should not live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again.” Commenting on this verse, missionary statesman and author **J.O. Sanders** wrote, “Life is now viewed in two dimensions – ‘hitherto,’ and ‘henceforth.’ ‘Hitherto,’ self has been the central point of reference. ‘Henceforth,’ time, talents, friends, possessions, recreations are all under His control. Contrary to expectation, such an embracing of the cross of Christ, such a complete surrender to Him as Lord, brings liberty that can be experienced in no other way.”²⁰

Watchman Nee said no one could be a true servant of God without knowing the principle of death and the principle of resurrection.²¹ **Steve Hill**, former Evangelist and Pastor at Brownsville Assembly of God in

Pensacola, Florida, asks, “What kind of ‘plan of salvation’ do we present if all we do is apologetically suggest to our hearers that they would be doing Jesus a favour by accepting Him into their hearts? What kind of gospel do we preach when all we tell our listeners is: ‘Just confess Jesus as Saviour and heaven is your home.’ ‘Just pray the prayer and it’s a done deal.’ ‘Just come to the altar. It will only take a few minutes?’”²²

Dr John Stott put it soberingly: “If the cross is not central in



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J.O. Sanders

19 *ibid*, p.101

20 J.O Sanders. *Paul The Leader: A Vision Of Leadership Today*. Kingsway Publications, 1984, p.78

21 Watchman Nee. *The Normal Christian Life*. Christian Literature Crusade. Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, 1970, p.165

22 Steve Hill. *Personal Revival. God’s Way Of Setting Our Hearts On Fire*. Dayspring Publishing, 1999, p.122

our thinking, it is safe to say that our faith, whatever it be, is not the Christian faith, and our creed is not the Apostles' Creed."²³

If we keep proclaiming a gospel stripped of repentance, we will only create more pseudo converts, which in turn will tighten the handbrake on evangelism in the West.

What is true repentance anyway...?

Biblical repentance has three aspects: a target, a direction and an effect. Let me explain. The **target** of repentance is behaviour and attitudes. At the point of conversion, the non-Christian is agreeing



“In the New Testament, the term for repentance, metanoeo, focuses on attitudes. It literally means ‘to think differently about something’ or to have a change of mind.”

Millard Erickson

to change his or her attitude. This will in turn lead to a change of behaviour. The Old Testament word for “repent,” when concerned with behaviour, is the word *shuv*. This word stresses the importance of a conscious moral separation from sin and the need to forsake sin and enter into fellowship with God (e.g. 2 Chronicles 7:14).

In the New Testament the term for repentance, *metanoeo*, focuses on attitudes. It literally means “to think differently about something” or “to have a change of mind.”²⁴ The **direction** of repentance is away from evil and self, towards God.

The **effect** of repentance is a stirring of the emotions. In the Old Testament, another word used for repent is *nacham*.²⁵ This meant to “pant, sigh or groan” and came to mean “lament” or “grieve.” The New Testament also uses a term for repentance which focuses on the emotions. It is the word *metamelomai* which means “to have a feeling of care, concern, or regret.”²⁶

Theologian **Millard Erickson** summarises the



23 Cited in David Watson. *I Believe In Evangelism*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1976, p.71

24 Millard J. Erickson. *Christian Theology*. Baker Book House, 1985, pp.937-938

25 For example Genesis 6:6; Exodus 32:14

26 For example Matthew 21:29; Matthew 27:3

teaching of both Testaments on the effect of true repentance. “Repentance is godly sorrow for one’s sin, together with a resolution to turn from it. There are other forms of regret over one’s wrongdoings which are based upon different motivations. One motivation may be little more than selfishness. If we have sinned and the consequences are unpleasant, we may well regret what we have



“Real repentance is sorrow for one’s sin because of the wrong done to God and the hurt inflicted upon Him.”

Millard Erickson

done. But that is not true repentance. That is mere penitence. Real repentance is sorrow for one’s sin because of the wrong done to God and the hurt inflicted upon Him. This sorrow is accompanied by a genuine desire to abandon that sin. In the case of true repentance, there is regret over the sin even if the sinner has not suffered any unfortunate personal effects because of it.”²⁷

How to help new Christians receive the benefits...

Making Jesus Lord, therefore, is both a decision and a process.²⁸ So when people respond to an altar call and cry out, “I want to be a Christian,” we ought to guide them into a decisive repentance experience, or they will not receive the benefits of becoming a Christian. If we don’t ensure this happens at the point of salvation, we disregard the clear teaching of Scripture. Then, after they have made their decision to become a Christian, the challenge

for them (and for us that have been Christians for a while) is to make Jesus Lord moment by moment throughout life (continual repentance).



Wrestling with genuine repentance is not always easy...

To be sure, everyone who is genuinely saved is the

27 Millard J. Erickson. *Christian Theology*; Baker Book House, 1985, pp.937-938

28 Acts 26:18, 19; 1 Corinthians 15:1-5. The Greek word for repent is *metanoeo*. In Acts 2:38, Revelation 2:5, 2:16, 3:3 and 3:19 the word is used in the aorist tense and refers to repentance as a specific act. In Acts 2:38 this is at the point of conversion. This is the ‘decision’ of repentance. But the word “repent” is also used in the present tense and means “to keep on repenting”, e.g. Matthew 3:2, Mark 1:15. In these verses, repentance is both a decision and a process. In other words, repentance starts at conversion and continues throughout the life of the believer.

recipient of a miracle. It's the miracle of regeneration. However, the conversion experience of some is *visibly* noticeable and dramatic. Because of a powerful work of the Holy Spirit, some people can be instantly and thoroughly set free from problems and habits. For example, one man went into the waters of baptism with tattoos, and came up from the waters without them. Another was a chain smoker, and after the prayer of salvation, never smoked again. One lady told me she was a rabid swearer before she was saved. After the prayer of salvation, she noticed she stopped swearing instantly and permanently. With others, though they are genuinely saved, the outward *visible* change may not be quite so dramatic, measurable, or decisive. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether they have repented.



Some may also ask, “To what extent must the person exhibit visible change? What about the alcoholic? Or what about the person with habitual sins and addictions who wants to become a Christian? Can they not become a Christian until they have successfully turned from those habits?” Clearly they can.

Others ask, “What about the person with habits and addictions who still struggles with them after conversion?” How should we answer? A decision to repent demands a change of behaviour only where the change is within the capacity of the individual to change. That which is beyond willpower is the sovereign work of God alone. But the potential new Christian, if genuine, will say, “I sincerely want to change now and keep on changing for the rest of my life.” The sincerity of the declaration is critical, and this is what we ought to look for. Complete victory over some habits and addictions often takes time, as God leads, heals, restores and empowers the new life. Which behaviours are habitual or addictive, and which are not? This needs to be discerned, case by case.

Let me illustrate the importance of repentance at the point of conversion. I was preaching the gospel at a two-day rock concert attended by 13,000 people. At one point in the weekend, when no bands were playing onstage, I gathered a group and began to proclaim the gospel “open air” to about twenty people. I gave an invitation at the end, and Sue, a young woman in her mid-twenties,

responded. She wanted to become a Christian. I took her through some excellent studies called *Christianity Explained*, in which the fifth lesson deals with repentance. Sue's conscience soon alerted her to the fact that she was sleeping with her boyfriend in a tent where the rock concert was happening. She asked me what she needed to do about this. She really loved him.

What would you have done? I had three options:

1. Allow her to continue in known sin and adopt a "God will work it all out" approach. I could tell Sue she could become a Christian immediately if she really wanted to, even though she was going to keep sleeping with her boyfriend. I could tell her that as she walked with Jesus, post-conversion, He would resolve the twin issues of her non-Christian boyfriend and sex before marriage. i.e. she could keep her boyfriend, continue to have sex outside of marriage, and be a Christian. I could reason, "Better to have Sue connecting with Christians, coming to church and living in sin than not have her in the church at all." You'll notice this approach skips decisive repentance.
2. Allow her to continue in sin, but encourage a soft heart and a "Let Jesus show you" approach. I could say, "as you walk with Jesus and commit to reading His Word, going regularly to church and learning about Him, you will find your conscience is going to challenge you about this. If you stay soft-hearted and willing to learn, you will become more and more aware of what God's view of right and wrong – and you will be faced with a choice. That won't happen just with sex, but in all sorts of other areas too. God can help you make the right choices – but you have to be willing to change and to start the process of lining up your life with what the Bible teaches."
3. The "delay the decision to become a Christian" approach. I could take time to talk through the two sticking points (the non-Christian boyfriend and pre-marital sex). I could advise Sue to wait for God to work in her heart (that is, wait for her to be willing to break her ties with the non-Christian boyfriend and come to the place where she would resolve not to have



sex outside of marriage) before making a decision to become a Christian. I could try to involve her in church and encourage her to build relationships with Christians with the hope that these influences would give her strength and support through prayer and relationship to make the right decisions. In other words, I could insist on decisive repentance before telling Sue she was a Christian.

What would you have done?

Balance is always best....

To help you decide, I need to emphasise the need for balance. Accordingly, I want to quote an excellent word of caution from the Lausanne Covenant:

“If we underemphasise repentance, we offer sinners what Bonhoeffer called ‘cheap grace,’ but if we overemphasise it we may be preaching the law rather than the gospel, a code rather than Christ, and salvation by works rather than by grace through faith.

Secondly, if we do nothing to identify what is meant by ‘sin,’ we are asking for repentance in a vacuum, which is an impossibility; whereas if we become too specific in naming sins, either we may try to do the Holy Spirit’s convicting work for Him or we may forget the complex cultural factors (for example the case of polygamy)

which should make us tentative in our teaching rather than dogmatic.

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“Perfection is indeed the goal to be set before them, but we must not require maturity of understanding or behaviour from a newborn babe in Christ.”

Lausanne Covenant

Thirdly, it is possible to imply that conversion involves no radical change, while it is equally possible to expect too much of enquirers and new converts. Perfection is indeed the goal to be set before them, but we must not require maturity of understanding or behaviour from a newborn babe in Christ.”²⁹



What Ezekiel would say to the Western Church today...

In closing, let me quote again one of the most sobering passages in the Old Testament.

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from Me. When I say to the wicked, ‘Oh wicked man, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin but you will have saved your own life” (Ezekiel 33:7-9).



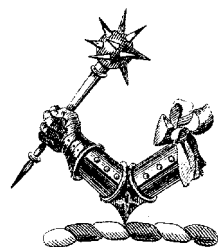
“Converting non-Christians is, ultimately, God’s job. Warning them, by presenting the whole gospel, is ours.”

If Ezekiel were to turn up now and analyse our problem of pseudo converts in the Western Church, I imagine he would say something like this:

“You have misunderstood what God meant when He commanded you to evangelise. Your problem is you have stopped warning people. You’ve focussed on attracting them, gaining their respect, changing them, offering them a lifestyle improvement, and befriending them. None of these things is wrong. In fact, these things are a big part of my plan. Keep these things up. But if that’s *all* you do, you’ll end up with a lot of pseudo converts in your churches.”

By “warning” I mean two things: explaining to non-Christians the consequences of rejecting Jesus Christ and explaining to prospective Christians the cost of discipleship.

Converting non-Christians is, ultimately, God’s job. Warning them, by presenting the *whole* gospel, is ours. Remember, Ezekiel was not charged with turning the wicked around. He was only called to warn them. Our first priority is to “warn the wicked.” We want to win them and we proclaim the gospel with that intention but, as we have discovered in this book, ultimately “salvation belongs to the Lord” (Revelation 7:10).



What God told a pastor in his hotel room...

Pastor and author **Ted Haggard** had a revelation of this scripture from Ezekiel. He tells how he had rented



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“The Lord was apparently showing me I did not have the privilege of just reading my Bible, praying nice prayers, and pastoring a pleasant little church. I had to help rescue a lot of people from impending eternal disaster. I knew the responsibility was mine... I knew God would hold me responsible. So I begged for mercy and went to work.”

Ted Haggard

a room at a local hotel to pray and fast for his city.

“From my room I could see the northern portion of Colorado Springs,” he wrote. “Worship music was playing in the background. I had been praying and meditating on the Scriptures when I started to feel as if my hands were dirty and something was on them. I kept wringing them to get whatever it was off. Suddenly I realised it was the blood of people’s lives on my hands. The Lord was apparently showing me I did not have the privilege of just reading my Bible, praying nice prayers, and

pastoring a pleasant little church. I had to help rescue a lot of people from impending eternal disaster. I knew the responsibility was mine... I knew God would hold me responsible. So I begged for mercy and went to work.”³⁰

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“If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies.”

Charles Spurgeon.

In a sermon at Exeter Hall in 1860, **Charles Spurgeon** declared,

“If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies. And if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, *and let not one go there un-warned and un-prayed for.*”³¹



30 Ted Haggard. *Primary Purpose. Making It Hard For People To Go To Hell From Your City*. Creation House, Florida. 1995. pp.29-30

31 Cited in Kirk Cameron and Ray Comfort. *The Way Of The Master. How To Share Your Faith Simply, Effectively; Biblically ... The Way Jesus Did*. Tyndale Books, 2003, p.177

Jesus was constantly warning His audiences.³² Paul was the same. Christian leaders, we ought to join with Paul, Ezekiel, and Charles Spurgeon, to beg God's mercy and go to work. Do everything you can to move people in your church on from "connection" to "conversion." Teach about the difference. Help them to be fruitful by helping them to enter through the narrow way. Proclaim *the* gospel regularly to non-Christians outside your church, and to the pseudo converts within it. We *must* increase the pool of people who are active in personal evangelism. "We have one task," said Billy Graham, "the penetration of the entire world in our generation with the gospel."³³

We are near the end of our critique of the battle for souls. On the battlefield there are two areas left to inspect. No book on the topic of how the devil hinders evangelism can skip what I am about to share in the next two chapters. Come with me. I have left the best until last...



"We have one task, the penetration of the entire world in our generation with the gospel."

Billy Graham

32 (e.g. Matthew 7:24-27; Matthew 13:36 – 42; Matthew 13:47-50; Matthew 23; Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 16:19-31). Paul was the same (e.g. Romans 2:6-8; Galatians 5:19-21).

33 <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/berlinaddress.htm>