

Brad J. Kallenberg

Conversion Converted: A Postmodern Formulation of the Doctrine of Conversion

After a study of the work of Billy Graham it may be interesting to rethink what exactly is involved in conversion. Mr Kallenberg is an adjunct teacher for Fuller Theological Seminary and is on the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ.

One easily overlooks the context in which René Descartes announced his intentions 'to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundation.'¹ These were frantic times, writes Stephen Toulmin.² The seventeenth century, which would endure both the Great Plague and the Little Ice Age, would also witness one of the greatest social upheavals known to history. The Church stepped up its constraints and controls. The intractability of the Reformers precipitated an epistemological crisis.³ Prosperity ground to a halt. Massive unemployment provided a pool of mercenaries to wage the Thirty Years' War. Apocalyptic fever ran amok.

It was *this* Europe that embraced Descartes' program for epistemic certainty. In order to arbitrate between a multiplicity of religious voices, each of which claimed to be authoritative, the Enlightenment Project which followed Descartes sought to jettison all things historical. But the quest for an ahistorical, trans-cultural criterion of rationality was doomed to fail precisely because,

¹ René Descartes, 'Meditations on First Philosophy,' in Donald A. Cress (trans) *Discourse on Method; and, Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 59. Originally published in 1641.

² Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 13-22.

³ Cf. Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight From Authority* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). Stout argues that both *scientia* (logical demonstration) and *opinio* (knowledge founded upon authority) fell into disrepute; the former at the hands of the nominalists and the latter suffered demise with the multiplication of religious voices. Descartes' solution was to salvage *scientia* by adopting the more strenuous criteria of radical foundationalism. Foundationalism, as we shall see, is one of the three marks of the modernity.

observes Alasdair MacIntyre, there was no ahistoric place upon which to stand.⁴ Both traditions and their justifications are by nature inescapably historical.

MacIntyre highlights the historical nature of traditions and their justifications in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* where he defines tradition as 'an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition . . . and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.'⁵ In his view a tradition is, first, self-referentially justified if it passes tests of coherence, correspondence, explanatory adequacy, and sufficiency to withstand objections.⁶ Furthermore, rival traditions compete for viability in a battle of 'survival of the fittest' where justification entails overcoming external challenges and internal crises. The tradition which fails to vindicate itself in the 'historical process of dialectical justification' will, and ought to, die, and in dying will no longer be a rival.

Christianity constitutes a tradition in the MacIntyrean sense. The communally recognized set of 'fundamental agreements' is the Christian Scriptures.⁷ The historical process of overcoming obstacles is chronicled in its confessions, creeds and dogmatic systems. This process is not merely an abstract exercise carried out by armchair theologians. Rather, it is a 'historically extended, socially embodied argument'⁸ implying that no sharp line can be drawn between communal beliefs and communal practices. Thus, doctrines can be thought of as both tracing and constraining the development of its distinctive practices.

One such tradition-constitutive practice for Christianity is evangel-

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 356-62.

⁷ MacIntyre argues that for a tradition to be a tradition it must be 'embodied in a set of texts which function as the authoritative point of departure for tradition-constituted enquiry and which remain as essential points of reference for enquiry and activity, for argument, debate, and conflict within that tradition' (MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 383).

⁸ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 222.

ism.⁹ It is distinctively Christian if for no other reason than because it is the recounting of our story (I speak from within this tradition) and no one else's. If, as MacIntyre argues, our *telos* is discovered in the extension of our tradition, then assisting Christian practices, such as evangelism, to overcome obstacles is our moral obligation.¹⁰ I intend to argue in this paper that the practice of evangelism is jeopardized by incoherencies in the conservative formulations of the doctrine of conversion. To analyze this problem I shall be examining this doctrine as formulated by American systematic theologian Louis Berkhof.¹¹ I shall argue that his formulation of the doctrine is deficient in precisely the three ways in which he has presupposed modern philosophy.¹² A necessary step, therefore, in the extension of the practice of evangelism is to correct the deficiencies in the doctrine of conversion. However, since it is impossible to formulate a doctrine without reference to any history or language or philosophy, then the next, though not ultimate, move in vindicating the Christian tradition will be to recast what George Lindbeck calls the 'second order proposition' of the doctrine into a postmodern form.¹³ The

⁹ Various lists of the distinctively Christian practices have been attempted. Craig Dykstra includes interpreting scripture, worship, prayer, evangelism, confession, reconciliation, social criticism, and the mutual bearing of suffering. Craig R. Dykstra, 'Reconceiving Practice,' in Barbara G. Wheeler and Edward Farley (eds) *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Louisville, KY: Westminster & John Knox Press, 1991), 48.

¹⁰ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 215–225.

¹¹ Berkhof seems to be an apt exemplar of conservative theology not only because his works are widely disseminated (fourth printing, five languages, etc.) but also because he intentionally constructed his system with 'anti-Modernist safeguards' in order to protect doctrine from the 'fundamental principles of some erring philosophy'. Cf. J. Gordon Melton, *Religious Leaders of America*, 1st ed. (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1991), 78; see also Louis Berkhof, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 15.

¹² Stephen Toulmin calls the period from 1650 to 1950 an 'Ω-shaped' trajectory that succeeded only in bringing philosophy back to where it began. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, 167.

¹³ To the extent that 'modernism' is the philosophical counterpart to theological and political liberalism 'postmodernism' comes as a welcome relief (Arne Rasmussen, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jurgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas*, vol. 49, *Studia Theologica Lundensia* [Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1994] 250). Yet this term is the source of great confusion. In the French philosophical tradition, the term has come to be synonymous with the poststructuralist literary theories of Jacques Derrida, et al. However, in Anglo-American philosophical tradition the term appears in debates over whether the 'modern' period (ca. 1650–1950) in philosophy has ended. It is in this latter sense that I will use the term, namely, that the period of thought marked by foundational epistemology, metaphysical reductionism, and representational-expressivist theories of language is being eclipsed by a new 'post-modern' period marked by epistemological and

implications for the practice of evangelism will follow directly from the postmodern doctrine of conversion. I will close the paper with a few reflections on the orthodoxy of this project.

Inadequacies in Berkhof's doctrine of conversion

Berkhof's discussion of soteriology (Part IV) consists entirely in outlining the logical sequence of the *ordo salutis*. In Berkhof's mind, the *ordo* is that unitary process by which God applies the work of salvation, wrought in Christ, to the individual and by which it becomes subjectively realized.¹⁴ Conversion lies in the logical middle of the salvation event. Conversion is preceded by *calling* (the bringing of God's Word to the person) and *regeneration* (the change in the soul's basic disposition resulting from the implantation of new life through the indwelling Holy Spirit). If *regeneration* is the change in an individual's condition which enables him or her to hear and respond to God's call, then *conversion* is the very first act of the regenerate soul in accordance with its new and holy disposition. Since both God and the individual are involved in the event of conversion, it must be given a twofold definition: 'Active conversion is that act of God whereby He causes the regenerated sinner, in his conscious life, to turn to Him in repentance and faith. . . . Passive conversion is the resulting conscious act of the regenerate sinner whereby he, through the grace of God, turns to God in repentance and faith.'¹⁵

We are now in a position to make some observations regarding Berkhof's treatment of this doctrine and to uncover the modernist deficiencies in his account. I shall argue that Berkhof's formulation of the doctrine of conversion is reductionistic (both metaphysically and linguistically) and epistemologically absolutist.

Metaphysical reductionism

Metaphysical reductionism appears in Berkhof as the tendency to think of the whole as nothing but the sum of its parts. In particular, the church is nothing but the sum of its members.

Theologians have not always thought this way. The corporate

metaphysical holism and a social theory of language. See discussion below under the heading 'Distinguishing postmodern theology.'

¹⁴ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941) 415–16. The complete *ordo salutis* is: calling, regeneration, conversion, faith, justification, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification.

¹⁵ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 483.

dynamic of conversion, which is present as early as Cyprian,¹⁶ is absent in Berkhof for whom conversion is a transaction solely between God and the individual. Berkhof construes the individual to be prior to the community in two ways. First, he downplays the possibility of national conversion:

these [Old Testament] national conversions were merely of the nature of moral reformations. They may have been accompanied by some real religious conversions of individuals, but fell far short of the true conversion of all those that belonged to the nation. As a rule they were very superficial.¹⁷

Apparently the quality of national conversions is proportional to the percentage of individuals who convert. Thus, 'true conversion' (*conversio actualis prima*) is treated separately from 'national conversions' as if the adjectives 'true' and 'national' named distinct species. The individual is treated as the real center of action and the community is treated as nothing more than the sum of its individual members.¹⁸

Second, Berkhof's individualist bias comes out in his excursus on the psychology of conversion.¹⁹ He cannot be blamed for attempting to make a bridge between theology and other disciplines. But it is instructive to note that he sees psychology (which in 1939 is primarily the study of the psyche of individual subjects) as the discipline which provides the most promising corroboration for his doctrine. Thus he cites Pratt for whom conversion is the 'achievement of the new self'²⁰ and William James for whom 'conversion lies in some activity of the subliminal self.'²¹ To his credit, Berkhof recognizes that these secular thinkers find correlation between the frequency of conversion and factors such as environment, education, and religious training but he dismisses these factors to reassert what

¹⁶ Cyprian's dictum, *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ('there is no salvation outside the church'), has its roots in the corporate sense of ἕνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον throughout Ephesians and in the body metaphor of 1 Corinthians 12–14. Regarding Cyprian see Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-book of the History of Doctrines*, 2 vols., trans. Charles E. Hay (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977) vol. 1, 183. Likewise Augustine's force of conviction on this point became the driving force for his solution to the Donatist controversy. Cf. Seeberg, vol. 1, 318.

¹⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 483.

¹⁸ Given his emphasis on the primacy of the individual conversion, one cannot help but wonder how Berkhof would explain the phenomenon of spiritual revival (e.g., The Great Awakenings) in which conversion appears to move geopolitically, and whose staying power appears to be, at least in part, a function of preexistent social characteristics.

¹⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 487–90.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 488.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 488.

is 'the theological conviction that conversion is rooted in the subconscious life' of the individual.²²

What Berkhof has done is construe the community as nothing but the sum of its members. This 'nothing-buttery' is metaphysical reductionism, which, by placing undue emphasis on the parts overlooks the objective reality and causal powers of the whole. That this is an error can be seen with reference to the work of Arthur Peacocke and Peter Berger.

All attempts to explain a 'whole' in terms of its 'parts' fall prey to a seduction of thinking that the latter are more fundamental, or more real, than the former.²³ To assume this is to fall prey to a second seduction: that the direction of causality in a system is only from the parts to the whole, or 'bottom-up.' In the sciences this appears as the expectation that one can predict events in biology by knowing enough of chemistry, and the expectation that one can predict events in chemistry by knowing enough physics. Physics, of course, is considered the premier science because it is the study of the states and events of the constituent parts of everything—electrons, quarks, gluons, and the like. Arthur Peacocke has argued convincingly that the widespread lack of predictability in the sciences is precisely what we would expect if, in fact, bottom-up causality is only half the story.²⁴ In physical systems, the parts operate differently in isolation than they do when incorporated into the whole, not because of the complexity of interaction with other 'parts' but because the whole achieves its own level of reality and effects a 'top-down' causation:

So it is legitimate to describe the realities postulated as existing at the higher levels (the whole, the 'top' of the 'top-down' terminology) to be causally interactive, in both directions, with realities postulated as existing at the lower ones (the parts, the 'bottom')—while continuing, of course, to recognize the often provisional nature of our attempted depictions of realities at both levels.²⁵

Peacocke's assertion that upper-story realities have real causal ability finds correlation in the work of sociologist Peter Berger. Berger extends the work of Emile Durkheim, who recognized that

²² *Ibid.*, 489.

²³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), §65.

²⁴ A. R. Peacocke, 'Reductionism: A Review of the Epistemological Issues and Their Relevance to Biology and the Problem of Consciousness,' *Zygon: Journal of Science and Religion* 11, no. 4 (Dec 1976), 307–334. In the social sciences MacIntyre has identified four sources of systematic unpredictability. *After Virtue*, 89–102.

²⁵ Arthur R. Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural and Divine* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 55.

social facts seem to take on a life of their own and interact with the world as objective realities *sui generis*. It is this phenomenon which moves Berger to speak of the 'coercive objectivity of society.'²⁶

To summarize, in the hierarchy of disciplines (physics, chemistry, biology . . . psychology, sociology, theology) arranged according to a metaphysical hierarchy of subjects (atoms, molecules, organisms . . . individuals, individuals in society, communally related individuals in relationship to religious ultimates) there is a characteristic causality which obtains at each level of the hierarchy.

I am not claiming that Berkhof's penchant for the individual is wrong; merely that it is incomplete. What is missing is the appreciation of the causal influence of the whole, i.e., of the believing community, on the character formation of the individual.

Linguistic reductionism

The second reductionistic feature of Berkhof's treatment of conversion is linguistic in nature. Berkhof espouses a propositionalism that overlooks the power of language to shape experience. Berkhof, like his predecessor Calvin, appears to understand the *regenerate* individual in intellectualist terms. How is progress attained in the moral life? By *knowing and understanding* God's truths. Therefore, it is not surprising to discover a strong cognitive element appearing in Berkhof's treatment of both repentance and faith. This cognitive element induces Berkhof to emphasize the representational function of the biblical propositions at the expense of their performative function.

The ultimate *object* of faith is God and its *seat* is the will, but for Berkhof, true saving faith cannot operate except by means of knowing the *content* of biblical propositions. The Latin term *notitia* connotes this cognitive dimension: 'the knowledge of faith consists in a positive recognition of the truth, in which man accepts as true

²⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 11. Cf. esp. 3–52; and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 45–118. While this coercive power can work on the side of good, it is more common to hear it discussed as assisting social evil. Since the 1950's thinkers such as Ernst Käsemann, G. B. Caird, Hendrikus Berkhof, and Markus Barth have given this idea fresh theological significance by linking social structures and socially embodied facts with the Pauline concept of 'principalities and powers.' Cp. P. T. O'Brien, 'Principalities and Powers and Their Relationship to Structures,' *The Reformed Theological Review* 45, no. 1 (Jan–Apr 1981), 1–10. For treatment of the church as a 'powerful practice' in the same vein see: James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, Volume 1 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 173–77.

whatsoever God says in His Word.²⁷ Here Berkhof stands shoulder to shoulder with the Reformers in rejecting the Catholic notion of implicit faith (*fides implicita*) because faith without propositional content is not faith at all.²⁸

As is the case with metaphysical reductionism, linguistic reductionism fails for what it leaves out. The role of Scripture's propositions is not *merely* to represent religious realities to us, though to be sure, there is a representational element in all successful speech-acts.²⁹ Berkhof's preoccupation with the propositional content of faith prevents him from seeing a second feature of language that comes to light in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's model of 'language games' solved previous mysteries in the way language works, for which the representational model could not account. Allow me to summarize the conclusions of a discussion I shall take up more rigorously later: Wittgenstein's philosophy of language displaced representationalism and in so doing precipitated the collapse of the word-world, or sentence-fact, distinction. With this collapse comes the realization that language itself is a social fact with its own top-down causal power. To put it differently, language shapes experience; religious language shapes religious experience.³⁰

Epistemological absolutism

The third deficiency that appears in Berkhof's system is epistemological absolutism. One cannot help but notice the extent to which Berkhof goes to define his position in contradistinction to Catholics, Lutherans, Arminians, and Liberals. In his view these others are not merely different, they are in error—together with 1500 years of church history—for having 'lost sight of the original meaning' of *conversion*.³¹

Berkhof is not merely being optimistic about the *certitude* which faith affords the believer. Rather, he is categorical in his claim that faith provides *certainty* in knowledge. He writes, 'faith carries its own certainty with it. . . . It is a certainty that is unwavering and indestructible.'³²

²⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 503.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 509. Cf. also Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985) s.v. *fides implicita*.

²⁹ James Wm. McClendon and James M. Smith, *Understanding Religious Convictions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 167.

³⁰ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), 30–35.

³¹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 489.

³² Berkhof, *Introduction*, 182. Cf. Berkhof *Systematic Theology*, 504.

Whence his certainty? How can he make such a categorical dismissal of all other confessed followers of Jesus? To make such a move Berkhof must presuppose that he has access to some universal criteria by which to evaluate the truth of other positions. I suggest he has two such criteria in mind.

The first criterion is revealed in Berkhof's conscious effort to provide *systematic comprehensiveness*. His system is reminiscent in form of 16th-Century Post-Reformation scholasticism. To cite one example, Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583), who was the primary craftsman of the Heidelberg Confession, set about to demonstrate that no corner of reality is exempt from God's providence. To prove this he constructs a table³³ which divides reality into 'everything in general' and 'everything in particular.' Particulars are further classified into 'every single creature' and 'every single event.' Events are classified into 'casual (both good and evil ones)', 'contingent (both good and evil ones)' and 'necessary (both good and evil ones)', and so on. The table derives its rhetorical force from the law of the excluded middle. Each sub-section of the table follows the form 'P & ~P' which, at first glance, does appear to have all of reality covered. The cumulative effect of the table is that dissenters feel compelled to withdraw from the debate for lack of something to talk about. Much the same can be said of Berkhof's system. Its comprehensiveness leaves one with the feeling that it must be accepted precisely because there is nothing left for an opposing position to say. He succeeds because he has become, to borrow Stephen Toulmin's phrase, 'more rigorous than thou.'³⁴

In addition to a logical criterion, Berkhof also holds that Scripture is the one and only court of appeal in matters of doctrinal orthodoxy. His view of Scripture as foundational for theology fuels his compulsion to attend to the most minute details of the biblical record. In his development of every doctrine, and of the doctrine of conversion in particular, he carefully traces the lexical definitions of relevant Old Testament and New Testament vocabulary (e.g., *shûb*, *metanoia*, etc.). He insists that the correct formulation of the doctrine must be in keeping with these original Biblical terms. It is instructive to note that Berkhof arrives at his understanding of *metanoia* by tracing the diachronic development of the term from the classical period up until the New Testament.³⁵ However, he insists that any

³³ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, second American ed., trans. G. W. Williard (NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1852), 155.

³⁴ Toulmin, 77.

³⁵ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 480.

post-canonical evolution of *metanoia* cannot be a positive development but a diversionary one.³⁶ In Berkhof's mind, the truth of Scripture is frozen in its distinctive vocabulary.³⁷ The truth claims of Scripture can never be improved upon. Therefore, given Berkhof's presuppositions concerning the nature and use of Scripture,³⁸ to recapture Scripture's original meaning, is to win the debate.

To summarize, Berkhof appears to defend the certainty of faith by linking it to two indubitable criteria which form the epistemological foundation of his system: Scripture and logic.³⁹ Faith derives its certainty from its object: 'there must be certainty as to the reality of the object of faith; if there is not, faith is in vain.'⁴⁰ The ultimate object which provides warrant for faith's certainty is the veracity of God. However, insofar as access to knowledge of God's veracity is *mediated* by Scripture, Scripture becomes the ultimate foundation for certainty:

The doctrine of conversion is, of course, like all other doctrines, based upon Scripture and should be accepted on that *ground*. Since conversion is a conscious experience in the lives of many, the testimony of experience can be added to that of the Word of God, but this testimony, however valuable it may be, does not add to the *certainty* of the doctrine taught in the Word of God.⁴¹

Berkhof is after a universal and timeless expression of the doctrine; one which is adequate for every age. What is missing in his account is a sense of how the historical consciousness of the theologian colors the formulation of a doctrine in that historical context. As we shall

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 481.

³⁷ Berkhof's attention to the words of Scripture is a pattern we have already seen in his metaphysical reductionism—the whole of Scripture is nothing but the sum of its parts. Therefore, the truths of Scripture are locked in its words.

³⁸ David Kelsey argues that the use of scripture as a final court of appeals is misleading because theologians 'do not appeal to some objective text-in-itself but rather to a text construed as a certain kind of whole having a certain kind of logical force . . . there is no one, normative concept "scripture." Instead, there seems to be a family of related but importantly different concepts "scripture."' David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979), 14,15.

³⁹ Philosophers distinguish two features involved in epistemological foundationalism: (1) the identification of an indubitable foundation and (2) the deductive process which constructs human knowledge upon these foundations (see for example, Toulmin, 81). By this account, logic does not belong to the foundation but is the means by which further knowledge is built. By using logic as a criterion (i.e., as a foundational principle), Berkhof may be unaware of the philosophical distinction between these two ideas but his foundationalism is nevertheless evident.

⁴⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 504.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 482, emphasis mine.

see, Lindbeck protects orthodoxy by distinguishing between first-order doctrines (historically contextualized formulations) and second-order doctrine (that which remains unchanged in each successive reformulation).

Distinguishing postmodern theology

In an article entitled 'Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies' authors Nancey Murphy and James Wm. McClendon, Jr. suggest three axes along which theologians, whose ideas are sympathetic with the philosophical agenda of 1650–1950, can be mapped.⁴² It does not require much reflection to see that the metaphysical reductionism, linguistic reductionism, and epistemological absolutism which I labored to illustrate in Berkhof's thought, are simply another way of describing the individualism, representationalism-expressivism, and foundationalism which defines the 'space' in which all modern thought can be located.

The ease with which Berkhof can be identified is not to his shame. It merely illustrates that theology can never be expressed without utilizing the thought forms of a particular social-historical-philosophical context. However, to the extent that the context itself is found to be deficient, one is warranted in seeking to express the theology with reference to another, better system.

Transforming the doctrine of conversion

We began this study by adopting MacIntyre's assertion that a tradition is vindicated in each successive triumph over obstacles and charges raised against it. Yet, in order for a tradition to retain its identity, there must be a continuity between the new formulation and its deficient predecessor. This problem appears in dogmatics as the primitivist-developmental debate: 'How can a doctrine change yet remain orthodox?' and 'How can a doctrine go unchanged and yet remain intelligible?'

George Lindbeck, in his book *The Nature of Doctrine*, borrows from the 'later' Wittgenstein to offer a solution to the impasse. Simply stated, theology is akin to a language game for which doctrine is the grammar.⁴³ Doctrine (singular) must therefore be distinguished from doctrines (plural) as universals are distinguished from particulars. Doctrines (plural) are 'first-order propositions'; they are

⁴² Nancey Murphy and James Wm. McClendon Jr., 'Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies,' *Modern Theology* 5, no. 3 (Apr 1989), 191–214.

⁴³ Lindbeck, 33, 81. Cp. Wittgenstein, §373.

culturally and historically specific hypostatizations of 'second-order propositions', namely, doctrine (singular).⁴⁴ What endures in the transformation of tradition from age to age is the 'deep grammar' of the religion. Yet there is transformation:

The first-order truth claims of a religion change insofar as these arise from the application of the interpretive scheme to the shifting worlds that human beings inhabit. . . . Theological and religious transformations that lead to relativistic denials of an abiding identity (when one assumes constancy must be propositional, or symbolic, or experiential) can be seen, if one adopts rule theory [Lindbeck's position], as the fusion of a self-identical story with the new worlds within which it is told and re-told.⁴⁵

If Lindbeck's analysis is acceptable, then theological conservatives (who, by and large, prefer a primitivist position) can account for both the historical fact that the doctrines to which they hold (e.g., trinity) are postcanonical *developments* and their conviction that these doctrines are orthodox precisely because something about them remains *unchanged*.

To transform the doctrine along the orthodox trajectory is a two step process. First, we must identify the second-order proposition which governs hypostatizations of the doctrine of conversion. Second, we must formulate a first-order doctrine, being careful to avoid those deficiencies which have come to light in Berkhof.⁴⁶

In describing the individual as a whole, Berkhof calls conversion a turning to God and away from sin. In describing the individual in terms of component parts,⁴⁷ conversion is understood as a many-faceted newness—newness of mind, of relations, of thoughts, of status, of desires, of volitions, of emotions, of direction for the moral life, of conscience, etc. I suggest that the governing verb in all cases is the idea of *change*: God's saving work results in change.⁴⁸ Questions such as 'What exactly changes?', 'When and how does the change occur?', 'What is the nature and duration of the process?', etc., can

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 82, 83.

⁴⁶ The task of identifying the second-order proposition has been made easy by Berkhof's own thorough analysis. He has given conversion both a passive and an active definition. Presumably, the deep grammar of both definitions is synonymous. Our task will be to examine active conversion for its second-order proposition. We will return later to the question of the orthodoxy of this move.

⁴⁷ This is yet another example of metaphysical reductionism in Berkhof.

⁴⁸ Berkhof rigidly separates the ontological change of regeneration and the resulting difference this makes in the life of the believer. To be fair to Berkhof, I will retain this separation and speak of conversion as that change, difference, or newness that is logically posterior to regeneration.

only be answered with reference to a specific doctrinal formulation. But the fact that *change* is the governing idea seems obvious enough to warrant moving to the next step.

Having identified Berkhof as the bearer of a particular set of philosophical presuppositions suggests the direction our path must follow. We must not allow ourselves to be seduced into thinking that we can create a universally valid and timelessly true formulation of the doctrine. Any draft we generate, no matter how polished, will be filled with historically conditioned phrases and philosophical assumptions.⁴⁹ With this awareness we can wittingly reference our contemporary social-historical-philosophical context, leave the Cartesian 'space' of the modernist period, and craft 'the best answer to be proposed so far.'⁵⁰

Conversion as naturalization into community

The first parameter for advancing the doctrine of conversion beyond Berkhof will be the avoidance of metaphysical reductionism. To move off the axis of *individualism* is to understand that a social fact (i.e., the 'whole' or the community) has objective reality or top-down causality. This move is present in those thinkers such as MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas who draw attention to the narrative shape of human existence and ethics. To summarize the theological application, the believing community contributes causally to conversion of the individual by being both the context in which, and the means by which, conversion takes place.

What holds a community together is the story shared by its members.⁵¹ For the Christian community this is the story of Jesus. But the story of Jesus is more than a communal center-piece around which its members rotate. Its narrative character means that *it*

⁴⁹ MacIntyre is germane on this point. When a tradition bursts into stage three (resolution), having overcome the pitfalls, challenges and obstacles of stage two (epistemological crisis), its adherents do not then possess an account of reality (i.e., the doctrine) that perfectly corresponds to what actually is the case. The best they can do as time-bound finite creatures is measure the truth of their formulation by a criterion of correspondence where the correspondence is more modestly expressed as the relation between their previous beliefs about reality and their now slightly enlarged perception of reality. In this way old beliefs can be classified as 'false' to the extent that 'between those older beliefs and the world as we now understand it there is a radical discrepancy to be perceived.' MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 356.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁵¹ Gilbert Meilander, 'Virtue in Contemporary Religious Thought,' in Richard John Neuhaus (ed) *Virtue—Public and Private* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 18.

involves other selves into the story. The Christian community becomes part of the story, or, better, it becomes an extension of the story. In Stanley Hauerwas' words: 'if we pay attention to the narrative and self-involving character of the Gospels, as the early disciples did, there is no way to speak of Jesus' story without its forming our own. The story it forms creates a community which corresponds to the form of his [i.e., Jesus'] life.'⁵² Thus to become a Christian (i.e., to convert) is to embrace the story of Christ in such a way that we join the story line.

It is often noted that the story which Luke sets out in his two-volume account (*Luke-Acts*) is never given a formal conclusion; the plot which constitutes the last 15 chapters is never resolved. Does Paul make it to Rome or to Spain? Is he martyred or does he die of natural causes? Luke's omission is by design. The book of *Acts* is not about the acts of the apostles, it is about the acts of the Church. The book's plot follows Acts 1:8—the expansion of the kingdom community from Jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth. From this vantage point, we can see that Luke cannot formally finish the book because the story is not over. It is still being written.

Just as the writing of the story is not over, so too, the telling of the story is not over. Since the community embodies the story and since a narrative cannot be reduced to a set of propositions, the Gospel cannot be extracted from the narrative in a propositional way. To put it differently, the story cannot be fully told without the community since the community itself is the embodiment of the narrative. One cannot participate in the story, or in the telling of the story, except by being part of the community. Hauerwas concludes, 'Redemption . . . is a change in which we accept the invitation to become part of God's kingdom, a kingdom through which we acquire a character befitting one who has heard God's call.'⁵³

Explained from the side of the individual, conversion involves a crisis of identity. When a person seeks to answer the question 'Who am I?' he or she rummages through his or her life looking for points of reference. 'I am a Norwegian bachelor farmer' might be the reply. But all ethnic, vocational, and gender place-markers have been removed in Christ: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.'⁵⁴ In the absence of these place-markers,

⁵² Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 51.

⁵³ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 33.

⁵⁴ Gal. 3:28 (NRSV).

people can only answer 'Who am I?' with reference to the roles they perform or the characters they play in the narrative of the community. Everyone embodies a story and all stories overlap. One is always someone's child, someone else's cousin, and someone else's neighbor: 'For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity.'⁵⁵ Therefore, the choice of conversion is not between being a lone Christian or being a communal Christian—that would be a reductive way of asking the question—the question is whether we will be members of the world's community or members of the Body of Christ. Stated this way the choice is clear.

So then, conversion must be stated with reference to community because of the multi-faceted narrative continuity between our lives and that of the community. But community also must factor into the equation because, as we noticed before, social facts have top-down causality. To put it differently, the church functions as a *means* of conversion as well its context. Gilbert Meilander describes the community as character-forming.⁵⁶ This is, in part, because virtues are the natural by-product of participation in communal practices.⁵⁷ We can at least say that the community plays a role in cultivating natural virtues (e.g., courage) which might predispose one toward conversion. But can we say more? In Catholic theology, the possibility of acquiring faith, a theological virtue, *before* justification (i.e., before conversion), in the same manner that one acquires natural virtues is disputed, but nevertheless allowed by some theologians.⁵⁸ For Protestants this is inconceivable—or is it? Can the community so shape one's character so as to instill faith into the unregenerate (preconversion) heart?

Austin Farrer seems to think so.⁵⁹ For Farrer, to understand the story of a Creator God requires the listener to picture himself or herself in a certain relationship to this being named 'God'; it is to think of oneself in creaturely, contingent, and dependent terms. This visualizing self in a dependent relationship is the beginning of faith.

⁵⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 221, 220. The power of community to shape character and identity may explain why Jesus was so insistent that fidelity to the kingdom community replaced even family loyalties. Cf., e.g., Lk. 8:21, 14:26.

⁵⁶ Gilbert Meilander, 'Virtue,' 19. Similarly Hauerwas, 'Redemption . . . is a change in which we accept the invitation to become part of God's kingdom, a kingdom through which we acquire a character befitting one who has heard God's call.' Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 33.

⁵⁷ Cp. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 181–225.

⁵⁸ *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, 1975 ed., s.v. 'Virtue,' by Karl Rahner.

⁵⁹ Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World: the Full Wealth of Conviction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster & John Knox, 1989), 11–12.

Thus, the community, by merely recounting the story (in written, verbal, and embodied forms), breeds and nurtures faith.⁶⁰

The orthodoxy of this conception is located in the awareness that the community does not act *apart from* God, but *as an agent of* God. Both romanism and pelagianism are avoided. The Church is not a 'dispenser of grace' but Christ's Body, an extension of divine action in the world. Furthermore, God does not exercise this means, as it were, from a distance. In the set that constitutes the Christian community, God is a member. Thus, naturalization into the community entails proximity to God. To open oneself up to the community is to open oneself up to God.⁶¹

Conversion as language acquisition

The second deficiency to be overcome in Berkhof's account of the doctrine of conversion is linguistic reductionism. To do so requires leaving the linguistic axis of modern philosophy altogether and making use of postmodern philosophy of language, which recovers appreciation for the power of language to shape reality in ways that modern philosophy overlooked.

The reality-shaping power of language, of course, has strong theological precedent. What sets Jesus apart from the Old Testament prophets is not his ability to heal the sick or raise the dead but to do so by merely speaking a word.⁶² Jesus' word to Lazarus recreates life. So evident is the creative power of Jesus' words that the Prologue to John's Gospel identifies Jesus with the *logos* with which God spoke and worlds sprang into being.⁶³ So too, Jesus speaks and

⁶⁰ Rom. 10:17 'Faith comes through what is heard, and what is heard through the word of Christ.'

⁶¹ At no point in this discussion do I wish to deny the possibility of an individual conversion apart from community. But the image of the lone Christian in Scripture is both an anomalous and a temporary situation. For example, Philip begins a mission work in Samaria apparently single-handedly but he does not remain alone for long. He both reproduces (Acts 8:4–13) and then links the fledgling community back to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:15ff.).

⁶² Cp. 2 Ki. 4:17–37 and Lk. 7:11–17.

⁶³ Jn. 1:1–13. Irenaeus builds his defense of the trinity on the notion that Christ as God's *logos* and the Spirit as God's *wisdom* are the two agents, or hands of God. cf. William G. Rusch, *The Trinitarian Controversy*, William G. Rusch (ed) Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 7. Yet contemporary scholarship favors a Semitic origin of *logos* over a Hellenistic one. As a title, 'the Word' is very closely related to the prophetic 'word of the Lord' while the description of the Word's activity is closer to the Personified Wisdom figure of *Proverbs*, *Sirach*, and the *Wisdom of Solomon*. Raymond Brown concludes his helpful appendix on the subject with these words: 'In the mind of the theologian of the Prologue the creative word of God, the word of the Lord that came to the prophets, has become personal in Jesus who is the embodiment of

there is life. Jesus teaches and there is light. Jesus commands and a new world (καινή κτίσις)—the Kingdom of God—springs into existence.⁶⁴

But why the spoken word? Why language? Why not ‘finger-snapping’ or ‘hand-waving’? I suggest that the creative activity of God is always tied to a spoken word because language is more than a fitting metaphor, it is a fitting *tool* for the act of creation. Language itself is creative.

The practice of parenting reveals that the inherent power of language to shape experience is not a foreign concept. The spoken words of the parent are performative acts creating the emotional world which the child inhabits. The child is alternately nurtured or denatured by words of praise or criticism.

We can get at the power of language by another route if we consider Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later writings which deal with the problems in the received account of how language works. Prior to his *Philosophical Investigations*, language was commonly thought to function like a still-life portrait. Propositions were thought to be snapshots of the real world, freezing the action and pictorializing the state of affairs. The *meaning* of a proposition in this account was in its referent. A proposition was considered ‘true’ insofar that a strict one-to-one correspondence could be established between the proposition and the external world. On the basis of such presumed correspondence between language (the domain of sentences) and the external world (the domain of facts) the final court of appeal for verifying any proposition was simply to ‘point’ to its referent.

Of course, ethical and religious language fared poorly by this account. Neither ‘wrong’ (as in ‘Murder is wrong’) nor ‘God’ (as in ‘I believe in God’) appeared to have empirically verifiable referents. As a result A. J. Ayer required only a few short paragraphs to dismiss all religious and moral discourse as meaningless.⁶⁵

Theologians have reacted to representationalism in two ways. Conservatives such as Berkhof, have accepted the major premise (‘Meaning is a function of reference’) while denying Ayer’s minor

divine revelation.’ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I–XII)*, William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (eds), *The Anchor Bible* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1966) vol. 29, 524.

⁶⁴ ‘For the first eight Beatitudes create a world just as surely as the word of God in Genesis 1 creates the heavens and the earth and all that is in them.’ Robert N. Bellah, ‘Christian Faithfulness in a Pluralist World,’ in Frederic B. Burnham (ed), *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1989), 83.

⁶⁵ Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1952), 116.

premise ('The word 'God' has no referent.') by asserting the objective reality of non-empirically verifiable objects. Liberal theologians, such as Schleiermacher or Tillich, accept the major premise, but salvage religious language by distinguishing between *meaning* and *significance*. Religious propositions, while lacking meaning *per se*, retain significance to the extent that they give apt expressions of religious experience.

Wittgenstein leaves the modern representationalism-expressivism axis altogether by denying the *major* premise of the argument. He insists that representationalism is an incomplete account of how we actually learn to use language.

Imagine teaching a child to distinguish pears from apples. You set before the child an apple and a pear and alternately pointing you say 'apple!' and 'pear!' All things being equal, the child can learn the names of objects in this manner. But how does a child learn to name properties which exist only *in re*? When my childhood chums tried to teach me the color 'yellow' by pointing to a picture of an object which they had colored yellow with a crayon, I can remember insisting to myself, 'No, that's a pear.'

The gist of Wittgenstein's argument is that pointing cannot settle the question of referent for properties (words like 'yellow' or 'smooth' or 'five') or for demonstrative pronouns (words like 'that' or 'this').⁶⁶ Questions of meaning are questions of usage. Therefore, Wittgenstein suggests a broader metaphor: language is like a tool or, better, like a game.⁶⁷ Just as the meaning of 'king' is determined in the context of playing chess, so too 'the meaning of a word is in its use in the language.'⁶⁸

There are two implications of Wittgenstein's linguistic revolution for our study of the doctrine of conversion. First, language has the power to shape experience. As hinted earlier, Wittgenstein's philosophy of language entails the collapse of the word-world, or sentence-fact, distinction. From Augustine's *Confessions* through Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* and Wittgenstein's own *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, words (and later, propositions) were thought to stand in strict one-to-one correspondence to states of affairs (factual states or facts) in the real world. This model has the effect of relegating sentences and facts to distinct domains. But by debunking the correspondence model, Wittgenstein removed the sentence-fact distinction upon which the correspondence model of meaning depends. This appears to justify J. L.

⁶⁶ Wittgenstein, §§9, 38.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, §§421, 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, §43.

Austin's claim that speech-acts are *performative*.⁶⁹ Language itself came to be understood as belonging to the domain of facts: 'the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.'⁷⁰

Of course, social facts, as we have seen, have their own causal effect on reality. As a social fact, language has the power to shape experience. Lindbeck asserts that 'it is necessary to have the means of expressing an experience in order to have it, and the richer our expressive or linguistic system, the more subtle, varied, and differentiated can be our experience.'⁷¹ This is because language embodies both the history of, and contemporary constellation of, ideas and beliefs which attend, assist, constrain, and direct experience. Thus, 'at two years of age, the member of a preliterate culture might still be a potential Confucius, Newton, or Beethoven; at twenty, never.'⁷²

A second implication of Wittgenstein's thought is found in the identification of *meaning* with *usage in context*. To put it differently, translation from one language game to another can rarely be accomplished by a 'phrase by phrase same-saying' because a proposition's meaning is tied up in the entire belief system embodied in the language game. Language is the backdrop which renders experience intelligible.

MacIntyre provides two helpful illustrations. To use the English name 'Londonderry' presupposes a vastly different Protestant history than does the use of its Irish Catholic counterpart 'Doire Columcille.' Therefore, to conflate the two as synonyms for one geographic location is simply reductionistic.⁷³ Similarly, just as different accounts of history are lost in translation, so too, can one lose the very context by which a term is rendered intelligible. To use the Greek term *σωφροσύνη*, is to name a list; knowledge of the term is knowledge of what is included and of what is excluded from the list of virtues in classical Greek thought. Thus, *sōphrosunē* cannot be translated by the English 'prudence' without lengthy explanation.⁷⁴ This is what Wittgenstein was getting at when he wrote, 'To understand a sentence means to understand a language.'⁷⁵

⁶⁹ The performative role of language is the particular emphasis of J. L. Austin's thinking. Cf. e.g., *How To Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962).

⁷⁰ Wittgenstein, §23.

⁷¹ Lindbeck, 37.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 60–1.

⁷³ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 379.

⁷⁴ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 381.

⁷⁵ Wittgenstein, §199.

Lindbeck was among the first to observe that religion itself is best understood as a language game.⁷⁶

Stated more technically, a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. . . . Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed.⁷⁷

This has two implications for the doctrine of conversion. First, if religion is a language game, then conversion requires learning a whole new language. I cannot improve on Lindbeck's concise summary: "The Christian theological application of this view is that just as an individual becomes human by learning a language, so he or she begins to become a new creature through hearing and interiorizing the language that speaks of Christ."⁷⁸ This cannot be done by mere phrase-by-phrase translation. It requires the novice to learn to play the language game by "practice and habit"⁷⁹ or by what MacIntyre calls learning a second first language as a child might by total immersion into the language of the new community.⁸⁰ The goal is not merely to understand the propositions of the host language but to gain fluency by mastering the technique of participation in the game.

Second, it follows from this discussion, that conversion is not a private meeting of God followed later by an optional participation in public and communal traditions. Rather, these two aspects, private and public, cannot be separated from each other. The language game of religion is not privately, but communally, embodied. Perhaps the practice of extended catechism for would-be converts,

⁷⁶ This point is disputed. Wittgenstein's own view appears to conceive of language games as small as thanking, confessing, etc. Cf. Wittgenstein, §23. Ironically, Norman Malcolm is responsible for both the notions that religion is and is not a distinctive form of life. Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 30–31. For a view similar to Lindbeck's see Paul Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978) and Nicholas Lash, "How Large is a 'Language Game'?", *Theology* 87 (1984): 19–28.

⁷⁷ Lindbeck, 33.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷⁹ Wittgenstein, §208. Also Lindbeck, 35.

⁸⁰ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 374–88.

which was standard before Constantine universalized Christianity, is more the way of wisdom than we have been able to recognize.⁸¹

Conversion as paradigm shift

I have claimed thus far that Berkhof's doctrine of conversion is deficient to the extent that it has presupposed characteristic features of modern philosophy. To advance Christian soteriology suggests reformulation of this doctrine in a way which overcomes these deficiencies. In describing conversion as naturalization into community and *language acquisition*, I have attempted to leave two of the axes which define modern thought: metaphysical and linguistic reductionism. The third axis of modern thought is an epistemological one. Its poles are skeptical foundationalism and optimistic foundationalism.⁸² Berkhof's claim to epistemological certainty places him at the right-most end of this continuum.⁸³ What remains is not to purge the doctrine of all epistemological presuppositions—this cannot be done—but to reformulate it according to a post-modern epistemological holism. The work of W. V. O. Quine and Thomas Kuhn will assist us in this process.

Foundationalism meets its match in Quine's essay, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism.'⁸⁴ Stated simply, foundationalism is the idea that beliefs derive their certainty from their deductive relationship to foundational principles. These foundational principles are themselves beliefs, but beliefs for which certainty is inherent in them insofar as they are either *necessarily true* (cannot be denied without contradiction) or *incorrigible* (e.g., we cannot imagine what it would be to question 'I seem to see something red'). Quine demonstrates that the two-class system of categorizing beliefs

⁸¹ By the beginning of the third century catechism lasted anywhere from one to three years. Eventually the function of the catechetical schools was absorbed into the weekly worship service with baptism becoming a yearly event on Easter Sunday. Tim Dowley, ed., *Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 115–16, 124.

⁸² Murphy & McClendon, 193.

⁸³ That certainty in doctrinal disputes is unattainable is easily illustrated. The most condemning evidence of this may not be the existence of the Thirty Years' War which demonstrated the inability to solve *intertraditional* disputes. Speaking from a Reformed perspective, in each of these debates the 'enemy' was considered unregenerate, depraved, and incapable of right thinking in doctrinal matters. More telling against the possibility of doctrinal certainty is their employment of the notion of *adiaphora* within their own ranks. To declare something as belonging to *adiaphora* is to concede that there will always be matters of religious disagreement.

⁸⁴ *The Philosophical Review* 60, no. 1 (1951), 20–43.

(derived-foundational, or analytic-synthetic) cannot be sustained. Beliefs are of only one class—synthetic—which is to say, the justification and intelligibility of even the so-called ‘foundational’ beliefs are derived from, and dependent upon, the entire set of beliefs. What results from the overturning of empiricism’s first dogma is the notion that human knowledge is a network of interdependent beliefs.

The second dogma of empiricism that Quine overturns is its insistence that every meaningful statement is reducible to a statement about immediate experience. Rather,

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. . . . But the total field is so undetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to re-evaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. No particular experiences are linked with any particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting the field as a whole.⁸⁵

It is this lack of strict correspondence between our beliefs and experience that accounts for the multiplicity of ways we deal with ‘recalcitrant experience.’ Quine explains,

A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some of our statements. Re-evaluation of some statements entails re-evaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections.⁸⁶

We are not even above pledging allegiance to entirely fictitious entities (e.g., irrational numbers) solely for their explanatory usefulness to the rest of the web.

Although Quine considers the web of beliefs to encompass the totality of human knowledge, the lack of strict correspondence between experience and beliefs allows for the possibility that ‘more than one theoretical construction can always be placed upon a given collection of data.’⁸⁷ The dynamics of the encounter between rival webs of beliefs is the chief concern of Thomas Kuhn. Kuhn extends Quine’s arguments by overturning what might be considered a third dogma of empiricism: the notion that the nature of growth in

⁸⁵ Quine, 39–40.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸⁷ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structures of Scientific Revolution*, 2d enlarged ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 76.

scientific knowledge has been 'development-by-accumulation.' Kuhn dissents, arguing that science has undergone a series of revolutions in which one web of beliefs, or paradigm, is substituted for another. The shift from Ptolemy to Galileo, and from Newton to Einstein, are examples of such revolutions.

Kuhn uses the term 'paradigm' to mean both the 'constellation of group commitments'⁸⁸ including such things as symbolic generalizations, control beliefs, values, and exemplars—and the interpretive framework that each adherent progressively internalizes in attempts to improve one's problem-solving skills by means of repeated engagement with the pedagogical exemplars under the direction of expert practitioners.

Kuhn's model of noetic paradigms explains how perceptual differences can be accounted for. Stimuli become sensations only after much neural processing. Closely similar stimuli passing through closely similar neural apparatus can result in widely divergent sensations when the neural apparatus of the subjects have been programmed by different noetic paradigms. I see an answer to prayer. You see a random accident. Our disagreement is not one of evidence but of how evidence is to be interpreted.

Kuhn's broad epistemological claim is, therefore, that all experience is enabled by the conceptual framework, or noetic paradigm, which structures the mind's perception; a noetic paradigm is to the human neural apparatus what a system language is to a computer.

The application of Kuhn's work to the doctrine of conversion is quite straightforward. That Christians process human experience differently than do their secular counterparts has often been raised as an objection against Christianity's validity. Kuhn's insights turn this objection on its head. If Christians were entirely intelligible to non-Christians, they would have nothing distinctive to offer them⁸⁹ because the essence of their difference is paradigmatic.

A second feature follows from the first: *paradigms are subject to change*. On the social level, paradigms are subject to revolution.⁹⁰ On the individual level, when the constellation of group commitments undergoes a revolution, there is a corresponding shift in the noetic paradigms of the individual; practitioners undergo a change in

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 181, 176.

⁸⁹ MacIntyre writes, 'any presentation of theism which is able to secure a hearing from a secular audience has undergone a transformation that has evacuated it entirely of its theistic content.' Alasdair MacIntyre, 'The Fate of Theism,' in Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 26. Cf. also Stout, 146.

⁹⁰ Kuhn, 84–5.

allegiance from one set of commitments to another.⁹¹ A paradigm shift for the subject can be likened to the totality and crispness of the perceptual change of a gestalt switch. Yet it is unlike a gestalt switch in that there is no return; the world as perceived in the new way is henceforth considered to be the 'real' one.⁹²

Third, being subject to change also means that paradigms are educable. In fact, the novice to a paradigm has no competence to judge or learn the paradigm independent of the community which shares it. The initiate must gain fluency of thought under the tutelage of the communal voices (be they instructors or instructor-written texts) which inculcate the paradigm on the strength of their own authority as expert practitioners.⁹³ This tutelage consists in guiding the initiate into graduated participation in the communal practices.⁹⁴

The unity of this postmodern formulation of the doctrine of conversion can now be summarized. If a paradigm is that which members of a community share and if a community consists in people who share a paradigm, then to shift paradigms necessarily entails naturalization into a community.⁹⁵ Similarly, if a conceptual framework cannot be expressed without the assistance of the community's language, and if the community's language always presupposes a network of beliefs to make it intelligible, then a shift in paradigm necessarily involves the acquisition of a new language. To sum, *conversion is the emergence of a new mode of life occasioned by a self-involving participation in the shared life, language, and paradigm of the believing community.*

Transforming the practice of evangelism

I began this essay with the claim that extending the Christian tradition by assisting its distinctive practices is the moral obligation

⁹¹ Although Kuhn does not shy from calling this transfer of allegiance a 'conversion' which, in the absence of compelling evidence, is driven by 'faith,' it is not this religious vocabulary that gives us the right to equate religious conversion as a paradigm shift. Rather, it is the deeper grammar of 'change' considered on the epistemological level that permits us to consider the value of an epistemological holism for the doctrine of conversion. Kuhn, 151, 158.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 85.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁹⁴ Like evangelism, prayer is one of Christianity's communal practices. For a discussion of its power to alter perception, see Nancey Murphy, 'Does Prayer Make a Difference?', in Ted Peters (ed) *Cosmos as Creation: Theology and Science in Consonance* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 235–246.

⁹⁵ 'Like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be a choice between incompatible modes of community life.' Kuhn, 94.

of Christians. Having illuminated the way in which incoherencies in the doctrine of conversion might be corrected, we are now in a position to see what implications follow from a postmodern formulation of the doctrine for the practice of evangelism.

Incarnational evangelism

First, if conversion is naturalization into community, then evangelism must be recognized as *incarnational*. The power of the community to shape the character of the individual is in the fact that the community is the bearer of the story of the Gospel. The Gospel is an ongoing story that involves other selves in its story line. Outsiders who encounter the authentic Christian community encounter the story of Jesus. The Pauline corpus puts it even more strongly. Outsiders who encounter the authentic Christian community encounter Jesus himself, because the community is his Body.⁹⁶ As embodied creatures ourselves we are incapable of communication with other persons apart from physical processes such as speech, touch, sight, hearing. Thus, in the incarnation God is accommodated to our manner of knowing. Similarly, to the extent that the Spirit now indwells the kingdom community, the incarnation has been in some sense extended. In this light Augustine and Cyprian make perfect sense: there is no salvation outside of the church. Christ cannot be fully known apart from his Body any more than we can establish a relationships with disembodied souls. Therefore, evangelism must necessarily involve an encounter with Christ as present in the authentically Christian community. This view adds depth to the evangelistic responsibility: 'the task of Christians is to be the sort of people and community that can become a real option and provide a real confrontation for others. Unless such a community exists, then no real option exists.'⁹⁷

Pedagogical evangelism

In Mark's Gospel there is a curious passage where Jesus defends his use of parables so that outsiders 'may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'⁹⁸ At first glance it appears that Jesus actually intends to conceal the good news from outsiders. If effectiveness in evangelism is measured by the intelligibility of the message, Jesus

⁹⁶ E.g., Eph. 3:6, 4:25, 5:22,30; 1 Cor. 12:12–31.

⁹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 105.

⁹⁸ Mk. 4:12 (NRSV).

falls short of the mark. But I believe Jesus is warning the church against those individuals who would wish to reap insider benefits while remaining outsiders.⁹⁹ Jesus' point is that true conversion requires becoming an insider. Part and parcel of becoming an insider is learning to speak the language so that Jesus' teaching can be heard and understood on its own terms.

Good communication, therefore, is not measured by ease of understanding, but rather by the appropriateness with which the message is handled. When there is a gap between the difficulty of content and the hearer's ability to grasp it, it is not always justified to accommodate the message to the listener's level of understanding. To do so may not only compromise the message,¹⁰⁰ it may cloud the fact that the goal of communication may just be to engage the listener in a new language altogether. One cannot learn to speak Chinese by studying English translations of Confucius. In such cases, it is the skill of the listener, not the simplicity of the translation, which must be improved. Language instruction, therefore, is a central part of evangelism. It is the art of bringing the potential convert up to speed so that the gospel can be understood on its own terms. However, to insist on fluency is not to insist on expertise in theology or dogmatics. It is possible to develop an ear for a language¹⁰¹ without being able to cite its grammatical rules. It is this ear for the Christian language that one picks up when he or she is immersed into the community which centers its life around the biblical text.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ For a discussion of the insider/outsider distinction and the possible *telic* force of μήποτε see Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 195–198, 201–203; William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974), 157–159; Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1952), 255–257. For an alternative view see W. Manson, 'The Purpose of the Parables: A Re-examination of St. Mark iv. 10–12,' *The Expository Times*, 68 (1957), 132–35; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Scribner, 1963), 13–21.

¹⁰⁰ For an excellent discussion of the way the liberal tradition slowly jettisoned its distinctively Christian cargo on the shoals of secularism in its attempt to make the gospel intelligible to the modern mind, see Hendrikus Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989).

¹⁰¹ The possibility of training one's sensibilities while falling short of attaining doctrinal expertise has resonance both in virtue theory as well as the *paideia* to which the NT alludes in Heb. 5:14 'But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil' (NRSV).

¹⁰² George A. Lindbeck, 'The Church's Mission to a Postmodern Culture,' in Frederic B. Burnham (ed) *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1989), 51–2: 'it is the patterns and details of

Dialogical evangelism

If the exemplars which embody the Christian paradigm are contained in the Gospel narrative, then part and parcel of becoming a Christian is to make the Christian story central to one's life.¹⁰³ It follows that evangelism must begin with a robust telling of the Christian story. To reduce the story to a set of formal propositions would be about as useful as expecting novice physics students to analyze a torsion pendulum when they cannot as yet identify what 'a' stands for in the equation 'f=ma'.

In addition, the story must be told with an eye toward the needs of each individual. To put it differently, to exchange the modern period's fascination with the individual for a recognition of corporate unity and its causal effect upon the individual is not to lose sight of the individual altogether. Rather, it is to shift our focus from the *individual qua individual* (for whom a generic proclamation of a generic set of propositions to a generic entity is entirely imaginary) to a focus on *individuals qua tradition-bearer*.¹⁰⁴ To make this latter move is to understand that the individual who receives our message is a member of a rival tradition and is unlikely to understand the story the first time around. The persuasiveness of the gospel must be delivered in a patient dialogue that seeks to inculcate the language by the telling, retelling, and rerepeating of the story.

Is it orthodox?

There are, of course, two perspectives from which to ask this final question. From this side of MacIntyre, a doctrine is orthodox if 'a core of shared belief, constitutive of allegiance to the tradition'¹⁰⁵ survives the transformation. It was from this perspective that I began the project. I attempted to search out the 'deep grammar' of the doctrine of conversion and preserve this in my postmodern formulation. To the extent that I have done so, it is by this standard orthodox.

But one might rightly wonder if my project can be considered orthodox from Berkhof's frame of reference. In my defense stands a long history of theological precedents. The notion that one gains a new interpretive framework in the 'paradigm-induced gestalt

its sagas and stories, its images and symbols, its syntax and grammar, which need to be internalized if one is to imagine and think scripturally. . . . What is to be promoted are those approaches which increase familiarity with the text.'

¹⁰³ Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, 50.

¹⁰⁴ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 398.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 356.

switch¹⁰⁶ we have called conversion finds resonance with Calvin's dictum that Scripture is for the Christian what spectacles are for the eyes.¹⁰⁷ The idea of tutoring potential converts in the language of Christian doctrine before verifying their conversion finds precedence in the catechetical schools of the early church. And the significance of corporate identity extends as far back as the Pauline corpus. But I suspect Berkhof would not be satisfied until this question is answered: 'Does the doctrine retain the prevenience of God?' Berkhof, I have noted, was careful to construct his doctrine in active terms as well as passive ones. Conversion is above all an act of God. At first glance my formulation seems to have removed God's involvement in the process.

The threat of construing conversion in purely intellectualist terms is a danger I share with Berkhof because I have retained his rigid separation between *regeneration*—the conferral of the new life of the Spirit and *conversion*. Yet part of the threat stems from failing to ask the right questions. I suggest that an important question is 'When does God act *immediately* and when *through means*?' The Reformed tradition beginning with Calvin clearly understood the scriptures and the sacraments as the means of God's working. Berkhof himself identified God's word as the means by which *calling* is effected. Given this precedent, what prevents us from seeing the language of, and the character-shaping-power of, the community as means by which God effects conversion? To reiterate a point made earlier, to say that God operates by means is not to imply that God therefore operates at great distance. The reality-shaping power of the community is what it is, in part, because of its members. God is a member of this community.¹⁰⁸

Nor does the doctrine of conversion as I have framed it bar the immediacy of God's grace. In fact, it requires it. Meilander notes that there is tension between the character-shaping power of an authentic Christian community and the fact that real communities are sinful to the core. This tension requires grace: 'Perhaps communities that seriously attempt to inculcate virtue while also gathering regularly to

¹⁰⁶ Kuhn, 120.

¹⁰⁷ 'For just as the eyes, when dimmed with age or weakness or by some other defect, unless aided by spectacles, discern nothing distinctly; so such is our feebleness, unless Scripture guides us in seeing God, we are immediately confused.' John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.14.1. This metaphor also appears in I.6.1. Note, however, that for Calvin, Scripture was in a class by itself, not merely one in a set of interpretive frameworks; it was *the* interpretive framework.

¹⁰⁸ Cp. James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986) 177–86; esp. 183.

confess their failures and await a moment of felicity are the best we can manage.¹⁰⁹

And grace, as an immediate action of God, is needed in another way as well. Kierkegaard observed that the movement from the ethical to the religious could not be compelled by any sort of reasoning process because to find any reason persuasive would mean that one had already made the transition. Therefore, the move between paradigms is always a criterionless leap. Kuhn makes the same point when he states that movement of adherent to the emerging paradigm is at first done against the grain of evidence.¹¹⁰ When Copernicus offered his heliocentric model it made calculations of the calendar year less accurately than did its ptolemaic rival. Kuhn credits the converts with 'intuition' by which Copernicus is perceived superior. So to say that conversion is conditioned by the reality of the community as a social fact and the reality-shaping power of its language still leaves unanswered the question of why one transfers allegiance. Perhaps it is in this gray area that grace operates. By this account, every conversion is still fully an act of God.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to extend the Christian tradition by formulating the practice of evangelism in a way that overcomes incoherencies in the received doctrine of conversion. The received account was found to be deficient in precisely the ways it borrowed presuppositions from modern philosophy. I have argued that these deficiencies could be overcome by identifying the 'deep grammar' of the doctrine and recasting it into a postmodern form. What results is a doctrine of conversion in which conversion is *the emergence of a new mode of life occasioned by a self-involving participation in the shared life, language, and paradigm of the believing community.*

If MacIntyre's analysis is correct, doctrinal formulations are never finished because the context in which reflection upon original texts is done is constantly changing. A tradition grows as it overcomes obstacles both from within as well as from without. While conceiving evangelism as a postmodern practice avoids epistemological, metaphysical, and linguistic reductionisms of modern philosophy, to do so will no doubt encounter threats from other quarters in the near future.

¹⁰⁹ Meilander, 29. Cf. also *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

¹¹⁰ Kuhn, 158.

Abstract

A growing voice in philosophy contends that it is impossible for theologians to formulate a doctrine free from all social, historical, and cultural conditioning. If this insight is correct, then the job of the dogmatic theologian is never finished; doctrines must be continually purged of erroneous philosophical presuppositions, as such errors come to light, and then reworked to achieve a better, though never ultimate, formulation. The adoption of historicism by contemporary Anglo-American philosophers may itself mark the dawning of a new, *post-modern*, period in philosophy. This paper argues for a postmodern formulation of the doctrine of conversion and discusses the implications of such for the practice of evangelism.