

Protagonist Corner: Conversions

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My earliest years—my most formative ones—were lived out in the pre-desegregated society of the deep South. That culture taught me that black people were inferior to whites, that blacks must be “kept in their place” on the lower end of the social spectrum, that laws are to be applied differently to blacks, and all the other venomous messages that came with Jim Crow-ism. In spite of my congregation teaching me to sing “Jesus loves the children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white,” the clear message was that our segregated ways were, in fact, *God’s* ways.

During my high school days, I merely assumed that those learned values were just the way things were supposed to be, but I also remember wondering why this was so. Somehow it just seemed incongruous with the Gospel. Later, during my junior year in college, I was selected to be one of several college and seminary students to represent Presbyterians from the US at the World Alliance of Reformed Churches when it gathered in Germany in 1964. The civil rights bill was being debated in the US Congress that year, and the Alliance was preparing to speak on the proposed bill. As it turned out, partly because I was from the southern United States, I was among a handful of students invited to help draft a resolution in support of Congress passing the civil rights legislation. Two of the students in that group were college/seminary students from Africa—black Christians who were articulate, personable, theologically grounded, and deeply committed Christians—precisely the kind of African American Christians my isolated world had intentionally kept me from knowing! As we wrestled with that resolution, I found myself steadily being drawn into a new worldview. For the first time in my life, I was discovering a new integrity about the Gospel, seeing that God’s vision for a just society has profound implications for the way we relate to people who are different from us, and that segregation might not be God’s way at all.

I have long pondered that “conversion” in my life, incomplete as it may be. I realize that there were numerous influences that led me toward a new moral perspective—my parents, a special uncle, college experiences, some courageous clerics, and a few friends. But in the South in the 1960’s, such voices were rare. Still today, I wonder how that change came to pass, but at long last I have finally concluded that it was simply a gift of God—indeed, pure grace. And I know that it could have turned out very differently.

It disturbs me to think of all the twisted things that the church throughout history has done in the name of Jesus Christ—the Crusades, the Holocaust, slavery, segregation, and the list goes on. It disturbs me even more when I consider that we *still* continue to claim that God is on our side as we trivialize the plight of the homeless or reject immigrants or ban gay and lesbian persons from the full life of the church. The details may differ from issue to issue, but the fact is that we still think of ourselves as gatekeepers for God.

Charles Marsh, in *God’s Long Summer*, wrote of five very different persons whose lives intersected in Mississippi during the turbulent struggle over civil rights in the

summer of 1962. Marsh describes how the *theological convictions* of these five leaders—some *for* civil rights, some *against*—informed the positions and actions that each took in that struggle. One of these featured people was Sam Bowers, the charismatic Grand Dragon of the KKK in Mississippi. He was suspected of orchestrating at least nine murders, 75 bombings of black churches, and 300 assaults, and was eventually convicted of some of these crimes. Throughout that reign of terrorism, Bowers served as a Sunday School teacher in his church, and he always maintained that he was acting out of his “Christian convictions,” out of his firm belief that segregation was God’s answer to communism and atheism. He saw himself as a modern-day Elijah called to slaughter the prophets of Baal.

Twisting the Gospel is not always quite so exaggerated. Marilynne Robinson’s novel, *Home*, illustrates a subtler, more common form of Gospel-twisting. Set in a small mid-Western town in the mid-1950’s, the story describes an exchange between Robert Boughton, an aging, traditionalist Presbyterian minister, long since retired, and Jack, his prodigal middle-aged son. Jack was disturbed by the unjust treatment of black people by “American Christianity,” and the elder Boughton argued that Jack was overly concerned about the race question because he had been watching too much television! As the sparring continued, the father eventually said, “I don’t believe in calling anyone’s religion into question because he (sic) has certain feelings (about the treatment of African-Americans). A blind spot or two.”

“A blind spot or two?” Subtle perhaps. But it was that same “blind spot” that led so many of us to stand on the sidelines while thousands of black men, women, and even children were systemically denied their human dignity and civil rights for generations. The point is that theology does matter. It matters a lot! Theology shapes our lives in deep and profound ways—including our actions or lack of actions.

If we have learned anything in more recent times, it is that our culture deeply shapes our values and beliefs. The challenge is to sort out how much of our theology is driven by the materialism and fears of our culture and how much of it is driven by the mission of God. Such sorting is hard work, especially in the heat of a battle. But in the end, even theology, or perhaps I should say, *especially* theology depends upon the grace-ful ways of God converting us to more faithful perspectives and practices. A few years ago, I conducted a modest research project in which I sought to identify some key qualities of congregations that have proven to be excellent “teaching congregations” for seminary students doing supervised ministry. In my role as a theological field educator at a Presbyterian seminary, I had observed that even though pastors of our stronger teaching congregations change from time to time, these congregations could always be counted on to provide generative experiences for pastoral interns. There was just something about them that made them strong contexts for teaching about faithful ministry.

In that project, I visited numerous congregations, asking lay and pastoral leaders what qualities they thought best defined their congregations. It was no surprise to me that most of them were focused on mission rather than their own survival; most saw worship as central to their sense of purpose; and most saw themselves as theologically grounded in the belief that God is still at work among us. I also found them deeply hospitable congregations that were especially good about welcoming visitors. But what I had *not* anticipated was that in spite of their welcoming capacity, these same congregations found it extremely difficult to speak about their faith, that is, about God

or Jesus Christ, with the same visitors they had so warmly welcomed. Talking with strangers, or even with one another, about matters of faith was simply uncomfortable for these devoted people of faith.

In other words, even our stronger congregations struggle with speaking of God to others in ways that help us respond to the public issues of our day in ways that have theological integrity. In that sense, I wonder if these congregations are really so different from my childhood church that accepted segregation as “the Christian way,” or from the Robert Boughtons among us who want not to deal with the realities of racism. Are they so different from the Christians of an earlier generation who justified human slavery by arguing for the “spirituality of the church”? Congregations who fail faithfully to connect private theology and public practices have more than just “a few blind spots”!

One of my theological mentors, Neely McCarter, used to speak about the need of pastors to have an “authentic sense of personal piety.” He was *not* encouraging us to escape into a “spiritual realm,” divorced from the quest for social justice, as is suggested by some recent devotees to “Christian spirituality.” Rather, I understood him to say that the Christian life includes *both* practices of justice ministries *and* piety, and that these must always be held together in ways that have integrity with the mission of God.

And so it is with preaching. Faithful preaching requires that we challenge listeners to welcome and honor the stranger in our midst, precisely because the God of Jesus Christ is hospitable to humankind. Faithful preaching requires that we confront the rampant fears that allow our consumer values to dictate our theology and our actions, precisely because the message of Jesus frees us from being captive to unjust social norms. Faithful preaching requires that we challenge the church to enter the world, seeking justice and living in peace, precisely because the activity of Yahweh is not confined to temple practices.

A tall order for the preacher! Fortunately, the result of our preaching ultimately does not come down to how articulate or dynamic we may be as preachers. Preachers may interpret or motivate, but ultimately human lives are *changed* by the grace-ful activity of God at work in our preaching, as well as our teaching and acting, converting our fears into new courage, bringing new vision to our blind spots. *Sola gratia!* Thanks be to God!