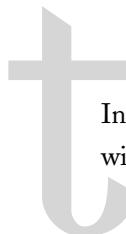


The Conversion Confusion

by Herbert Hoefer



The issue of conversion has become increasingly controversial in India. In fact, the definition of conversion has been a great historic controversy also within the church up to the present day. Some say it's a gift of God in Baptism also for infants. Others say it's a decision one can make at the "age of reason." Others say it's a moment, a "warm feeling," speaking in tongues, a born-again experience, and on and on. If Christians themselves are not clear about it, it's no wonder devout Hindus and secular politicians are unclear.

A second issue about which everybody is unclear is the relationship of Baptism to conversion. As mentioned above, some say Baptism is the very act of conversion. Others say Baptism is a public testimony of one's conversion decision. Others say "Baptism in the Spirit" is the only baptism that matters. Some say Baptism in water is essential for salvation; others say it's necessary but not essential; others say it's not even necessary. In the debate about conversion and Baptism in India, what are we Christians going to say that we can all agree on and others can understand?

Finally, a third controversy is what conversion and Baptism have to do with membership in a church. Can one be converted to Christ and never join a congregation? Once one is baptized, must one join a congregation? Does conversion/Baptism put one into the "invisible Church" so that one's membership in an organizational church really doesn't matter? Can Holy Communion be offered to an unbaptized convert? How about the other services of the church like marriage or burial?

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My experience in India is that this third controversy is the critical one. It's membership in a church that is so contrary to Hindu piety, so upsetting to Hindu families, and so threatening to Hindu politicians. If we can clearly state that one can convert to faith in Jesus and one can even be baptized, without ever joining a church, most of our difficulties with the Hindu community and the political parties will be over. It's conversion into a new culture; it's baptism into a new community, that is the problem.

Is Church Membership Essential?

Christianity grew out of Judaism. Judaism is an ethnic religion. It is a tradition of a people. They gather in worship to celebrate their identity. Christianity began with that tradition. The early congregations functioned like Jewish synagogues. The Christians gathered once a week as in their Jewish heritage. They read and

community. Conversion need not follow the Jewish community/synagogue model of Christian life.

In regard to the episcopacy, a traditional dictum has been that the episcopal order is of the “bene esse” of the church, but not of the “esse” of the church. Having bishops can be acknowledged as good for an effective church and ministry, but it is not essential for a church and a ministry to be valid. Similarly, on the

there is a difference between conversion and church membership.

At a conference in January 2000, an evangelist shared the following incident. The local tahsildar (government official) came to know of his evangelistic work and approached him. He asked, “Are you converting anyone?” “Well, what do you mean by conversion? Is it alright if people pray to Jesus, learn about Him, guide their life after Him, and accept Him in their hearts?” “That’s all alright, but no conversions!”

The official’s concern was not spiritual but political, not moral but cultural, not individual but communal. The evangelist said he left church membership up to the converts. They could join the nearby city congregation if they wished. It was good but not essential. It was their decision how they want to grow and live in the faith.

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interpreted the Scriptures. They enforced spiritual and moral discipline. They married among each other. Even the initial Gentile converts were accustomed to such a spiritual life, as most came from the “God-fearers” who habitually had participated in synagogue life.

This was the early pattern of Christian life. Converts joined a new community. You were baptized into a church. The pattern was set and continued through the centuries.

However, we must question if this pattern is of the essence of the Gospel, if it is commanded by God. We can readily think of many Biblical exceptions to the rule: Naaman, Cornelius, the jailer at Philippi, Bartimaeus, the Ethiopian eunuch, the Samaritan woman at the well, the Samaritan leper, the centurion at the cross, the Gadarene demoniac, and on and on. These all seem to have been converts. Some were baptized. We don’t know that any joined a congregation, and we know assuredly that many did not.

They all gave a public testimony to Christ. They all seemed to accept Him as their Lord and Savior. None was required to join a congregation. In fact, a few were specifically instructed not to leave their community and not to join the convert

basis of Mark 16:16, it’s been summarized that baptism is necessary, but not absolutely necessary. We seem to have a similar situation with the matter of church membership. It is good but not essential. It is necessary but not absolutely necessary.

What Does Conversion have to do with Church Membership?

Every pastor knows from personal experience that church membership is no guarantee of conversion. How many times have we conducted a Christian rite (a Baptism, a wedding, a Confirmation, a Lord’s Supper, a funeral) having plenty of doubt in our minds about the Christian convictions of the participants. We know all too well that many church members see their membership rather than their conversion as their assurance of salvation.

We know how personally disconcerting it is to find people outside of the congregation whose faith outshines many for whom we conduct all the rites (cf. Lk. 7:9). The pastors who minister to non-baptized believers in India certainly express this godly amazement. We all know from firsthand experience that

Why Not Promote Faith Communities rather than Churches?

We also must distinguish between church communities and faith communities. The church is a faith community, but not all faith communities are churches. One can be a part of a Bible Study group or a prayer group quite separate from one’s congregation. A faith community may be a group with whom one relates face-to-face, or one may participate at a distance. No doubt, Naaman and the Ethiopian eunuch and the Gadarene demoniac and the others felt they were part of the faith community, though they never had face-to-face contact. The faith community is the classical “invisible Church,” with a capital “C.” One can be part of the Church and never part of the visible church.

The objections to conversion in India center on the cultural and political issues of church membership. Politicians realize that church membership means

new community affiliation and new political influence. It means obedience to a new organization's rules and a clergy person and a community discipline. Families and cultural leaders fear a self-removal from traditions and responsibilities. Conversion isn't the issue. Baptism isn't the issue. Church membership is the issue.

If one remains within the family and the culture and the political party, there is no problem. Can one be a loyal member of the BJP as a Christian? If so, no problem.

Finally, there are styles of faith community evolving in India, which are not the hierarchical, Western-style organizations. The Sri Narayana and the Sai Baba groups, for example, are much more informal. They don't have membership rolls or required attendance or

ordained clergy or formal discipline. Yet, they are powerful forces in people's lives. They follow the cultural tradition of providing religious opportunities rather than religious laws. They are faith communities, not "churches."

Any religion must have standards. It must stand for something. It must hold up lofty goals and expectations. It must identify for its followers what is good and necessary and helpful. There is no objection to such religious teaching, also among the most strident Hindu fundamentalists. The objection comes when demands are made, when separation is expected, when affiliations are changed. Can conversion be to the standard and not to the church?

Membership in the Church (capital "C") is not a matter of joining an organization or conformance to institutional patterns

or obedience to appointed individuals. It is a matter of faith, of relationship to God in Christ. It's the same issue St. Paul dealt with time and again in his day, and which we institutionalized Christians need to hear again and again:

Do not let what you eat (we might add: or any other non-spiritual requirement) cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.... for the Kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by all. (Rom 14:15-18)

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