

A Spirituality of Conversion-- *Then and Now*

Part 1: A Case Study in “Post-Christendom” Conversion

It was clear when Clarissa walked into my study that she felt out of place. I recognized her as someone who had “been around” in various contexts, and remember seeing her name on a prayer list over the past several months. Most recently, I had noticed her in attendance at a few of our worship services on Sunday with Dan. The rumor was that Dan, an articulate blond haired, blue eyed graduate of Yale, was falling for an “unbeliever.”

And so after a recent sermon, Clarissa e-mailed me to say that she wanted to take me up on my offer to have coffee with anyone wishing to discuss the sermon or spiritual concern (It’s an offer I often make in the heat of a sermon). She was rather cryptic in her e-mail, just that she would like to schedule a meeting, soon if possible.

When Clarissa walked into my study, she confidently introduced herself and then politely sat down awaiting my lead. After some initiated small talk about her recent graduation from Yale, what she enjoyed about her psychology degree (which was my undergrad major as well), her present vocation as a teacher in the inner city, and some playful banter about she and Dan, I finally got around to asking, “so what would you like to talk about Clarissa? Immediately, and with a single word, she said: “faith!” “What do you mean” I asked? And in increasingly rapid fashion she explained:

I mean... I just don't understand what faith is. I have never been in a church before, and quite honestly have never really felt that I needed church. My first real encounter with religion has been through Dan, and well, I just don't understand what people mean when they BELIEVE something. Dan is intelligent and I respect him, and he has tried to explain “belief” to me without being pushy, but it just seems so foreign and unimaginable for me to “believe” the sorts of things that Dan does. In the first place, how can anyone say they “believe” something? What is “belief” anyway, and how would I know if I have it?” And then, how does someone get it? I mean... I find everything you do and say in worship to be so strange, and yet, I admit, in an odd sort of way strangely attractive... I mean... I really enjoy listening to your sermons, I love all the people at CPC, but then when I think about it all, it all seems so totally preposterous, if not honestly intriguing...

During the course of our conversation, urged her to never forget the way she felt about the topics of Christian faith, regardless of where it all ended for her. (It was by far the most delightful part of my conversation with Clarissa—hearing again the way Christian faith sounds to someone wholly unfamiliar with it). “Yes, whatever Christian faith is, it is preposterous, and perhaps this is our starting point,” I remember saying. I then began we talked about the nature of faith itself, and how

is the king of thing we must participate in *first* in order to believe, even as the idea of “faith” assumes that there perhaps other ways of “knowing” that through pure reason, even if always reasonable... and on it went.

As we talked that day, it was clear to me that she was struggling with the question of “faith” and “certainty,” especially as it seemed to her that the two go hand in hand to Christians, but about things that seemed anything but the kind of thing one could be “certain” about—she couldn’t imagine being so “certain” about ANYTHING, much less about the sorts of things Christians talk about! I left her with a challenge to suspend judgment for a while and to just “do it--” fully participate in the life of faith is vis-à-vis the church, and see what happens.

It’s a scenario that I have encountered, in almost identical fashion, many times during my tenure as a college town pastor, especially more recently. People who in some way were initially introduced to Christian faith through a friend or colleague, who after many conversations and perhaps casual encounters with friends of their friends who were Christians, who eventually risked going to a church social event, then participate in worship—its rituals, its teaching, the meal afterward further participation, perhaps with the music team or assistance in a coffee house, and then finally scheduled visit with the pastor and questions and inevitably, the whole this issue of “faith” in and in so many words, “certainty.”

To be sure, Clarissa’s story is arguably paradigmatic of a post-christendom journey to faith, especially where there is a significant series of decisions that lead to participation in the church, not as a “believer” but as a “seeker” PRIOR to, and in preparation for “belief in Christ.” The whole thing “Christian” just doesn’t make sense within an epistemological logic that wants to assuming the posture of the “unencumbered self” and “rationalist” way of knowing. Within Christendom, conversion was more authentic to the degree that a seeker was able to come out of the world of Christendom in order to distinguish his/her own personal faith from the Christian hegemony that surrounds her-- lest conversion be nominal and cliché at best. It’s as if one most first experience “worldliness” in order to come out of the world of Christendom in order to be really “saved.” Authentic testimonies were those that locate conversion outside of the social parenting of that comes by participation within the church or family. The “heretical imperative” toward faith was to first break with organized religion.¹ In post-modernity/Christendom- all this has changed. The “heretical imperative” is exactly the opposite and the role participation in another communal

¹ As can be anecdotally affirmed by the myriads of “testimonies” showcased over the last several decades, a conversion narrative that would stress social parenting, albeit through a religious institution or family, is at best considered boring and at worst viewed with suspicion as an authentic conversion.

context is increasingly essential in order for faith to become plausible—it must be experienced before it can be believed!

As I write these words, Clarissa is a full “believing” member of the church of Christ! And yes, she eventually married Dan. But is her journey to faith novel in church history? And what might it teach us about faith and especially Christian conversion in the emergent, post-christendom context? Of particular interest is the journey to Christian conversion *then* compared to *now*—e.g. *pre-Christendom* conversion compared to *post-Christendom* conversion respectively. It’s true, we could just as well review the journey to faith that is increasingly “eastern” in experience, but then the conversion stories that were even codified into church polity during the first three centuries are perhaps most intriguing given their embryonic proximity to apostolic foundations. And the sources are thankfully quite accessible if not strange to the modernist Christian. And so after a brief review of Christian conversion in the early church, we will revisit the celebrated conversion of St. Augustine as paradigmatic of pre-Christendom conversion albeit carried over into the early years of Constantine’s “state-church”² (Part 2). In Part 3, we will consider the whole thing theologically together with some possible applications for the journey to faith *today*

Part 2:

“Post-Apostolic and Pre-Christendom” Christian Conversion: The Illustration of Augustine

A common, might, we add modernist-Christendom, telling of Augustine’s conversion will almost always want to focus on the so called “garden experience” of chapter 8 in Augustine’s *Confessions*. By way of illustration, Harry Boer in his, *A Short History of Early Church*, tells the story this way:

It was in this situation [convicted of his sin and his bondage to it—his famous “Give me chastity, but not yet”] that Augustine entered upon the great religious crisis of his life. A government official who was visiting him told about two army officers who had been so impressed by reading Athanasius Life of St. Anthony that they had given up their army careers to become monks. Augustine felt deeply humbled when he heard this. Exposed to all the temptations of military life, these two men could deny themselves and take up the monastic life, while he with all his learning could not control his desires. As he was reflecting in the garden of his house on what he had heard, and feeling more deeply than ever his sinfulness and need of salvation, he suddenly heard a voice saying, “Take and read, take and read...” [and after going back to his room] He saw the Bible lying on the table, opened it, and read the first words that met his eye:

The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and

² It is true that Augustine’s baptism in 387 occurs sixty-five years after the conversion of Constantine and seven years after the Western Emperor Valentinian II and the Eastern Emperor Theodosius’s edicts requiring all Roman citizens to profess the faith of the bishops of Rome and Alexandria. (Nicene faith). Therefore, if Augustine’s conversion is paradigmatic of pre-Christendom, then a) this is the case in so far as it maintains a pre-Constantine spirituality of conversion albeit if only by way of a remnant tradition and b) in so far as it reflects also the apostolic foundation even

put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.³

And Augustine's conversion dates from the moment of this reading, in the summer of 386.⁴

It's true, there was a garden experience, and Augustine could even say,

I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled.⁵

You might even say that Augustine made a decision to become a Christian—but *was he converted?* Perhaps surprisingly—to the *Christendom* paradigm that wants to focus on personal decisions and the so called “sinners prayer” as the culminating event in Christian conversion-- Augustine would say, NO!

First, Augustine would keep his big decision mostly to himself, telling only a few of his closest friends and mother. He explained, “*What good would it have done me to have my motives discussed and debated and to have allowed that which was a good thing for me to be brought into disrepute.*” Hmm! And to make things even more interesting, Augustine would later describe the “garden” experience as something less than a full Christian conversion. For instance, he wrote about his feelings after the garden event, “*thus in that depth I recognized the act for your will and I gave praise to your name rejoicing in faith. But this faith would not let me feel safe about my past sins, since your baptism had not yet come to remit them*”⁶

It is true-- Augustine evidently turned the proverbial corner in so far as a personal decision to follow Christ was made. And it concluded what might well be described as a significant “first phase” of his journey to Christian faith. But he was NOT yet converted! During this first phase, as narrated in chapters 1-8 over the span of about twenty nine years, the journey was more or less outside of the participating in the church (with the exception of his early childhood). It was a phase rather that focused on practically countless casual encounters with ordinary Christians and the study of philosophical writers that resulted in many and various moments of introspection, philosophical shifts and personal re-examination concerning the meaning of life and purpose—all of which culminated in his “garden” experience in chapter 8. But what exactly was the decision?

³ Romans 13:13-14, Interestingly, the immediate context of the scripture passage, albeit not quoted in the Confessions reads: “*Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. Vs. 11.*

⁴ Taken from Harry Boer, *A Short History of Early Church (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 1976). P. 157-158.*

⁵ St. Augustine, *Confessions* (Alfred A Knopf, Random House, NY, 2001) p., 178.

⁶ *The Confessions*, Book 9, chapter 4.

Was it to become a Christian? Yes and No! For upon closer review of the rest of the story in the *Confessions*, it could be argued that he decided to become a Christian “seeker” or “student of the faith,” only to require participation in the church *in order* to finally come to a saving faith. But what is even more surprising perhaps, this process to saving faith was NOT exceptional in his day. It was actually the way most people were converted to Christian faith, even as reflected in the conversion narratives that preceded Augustine, and was even codified into the church polities of that day!

A closer review then of Augustine’s journey to Christian faith, especially as paradigmatic of the journey to faith that was common in that day in a *pre-Christendom* context will prove instructive in discerning the way of salvation today—in post-Christendom that is! We will want especially to discern not one, but three stages leading to Christian conversion in the early church!

Phase 1: Private Encounter and Inquiry Outside of Church Toward Becoming a Seeker

Prior to A.D. 64, the journey to faith was often quite public. For instance, throughout Luke’s accounts of the “Acts of the Apostles,” we see how the apostle Paul would visit a city and first ask to speak in the synagogue in order to present Christian faith as a faithful expression of the Jewish religion (Acts 14:1, 17: 1, 10) , but then he would preach go to the “nations” as publically assembled such as the Areopagus (Acts 17:22ff). Prior to A.D. 64, the populist jury was still out as to whether or not Christianity was an acceptable sect of an existing established religion. But as described by Carl Sommer, this all began to change in and around A.D. 64 once Christianity ceased to be associated with acceptable mainstream organizations, and began to incur increasing distain of the populace leading eventually to state sponsored persecution. To be sure, if you lived in the Roman empire between A.D. 64 up till around A.D. 350, chances are “there were Christians in your city, even if you didn’t know for sure who they were.” And there would have been the rumors—“rumors that Christians engaged in cannibalism (the Eucharist) and even sexual immorality (Holy kiss) at their secret meetings.” And of course, given the claims of Christians concerning the universality of Christ’s lordship, there were the rumors that Christians were a cult that stood against any sort of allegiance to the emperor. As this impacted the journey to Christian faith,

After A.D. 64, it was not longer possible for Christians to preach the gospel publically. The post-apostolic church had to devise other means of fulfilling Christ’s command, and they had to do so in a way that would not recklessly endanger the entire Church. .⁷

⁷ Carl Sommer, *We Look For A Kingdom*, “Chapter 1: Baptism by Water, Spirit, Blood, and Fire: Becoming a Christian in the Early Church” (*San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007*) P. 108

In this context, it is not hard to understand why the way to Christian conversion was increasingly “counter cultural.” Ordinarily, this meant that the first phase was more or less kept to the private sphere and especially outside of participation in a particular church community.

The culminating event of this private phase was the very big decision to “go public” (today’s coming out of the closet), as to begin participating in a local community of faith as a seeker/learner PRIOR to actually becoming a Christian. The journey to this decision might have involved reading Christian apologist-philosophers. It might even have involved an encounter with one of the few “street evangelizer” that were often persecuted. (Noted by Carl Sommer, Origin once noted, “we learn that even in the midst of constant danger there were certain Christians who made it “their business to itinerate not only through cities but even through villages and country houses that they might make converts to God.”⁸) However, by far the most typical, and arguably most efficacious influence during this private first stage toward Christian conversion was the ordinary encounters with friends, co-workers and family members.

About these private encounters, the pagan writer Caecilius once opined how Christians are “silently in the open.”⁹ Some of the common enticements to Christian faith that was often described in these ancient conversion stories included being drawn to the example of Christian charity that was so vital a part of the Christian community in that day. A person was also drawn to the testimony of Christian suffering in so far as it added credibility to the authenticity of Christian faith. But to the point, through these private means, a person would eventually take the big step of asking a friend or church leader to sponsor him/or as a “catechumen” in the church, again in order to become a non-member learner/seeker prior to full Christian conversion albeit at great risk of losing a job or being persecuted even.¹⁰ To participate in the church in a context where Christianity was considered heretical vis-à-vis populist culture was to take a great risk, which is why it was such a big decision—all of which perfectly explains the narrative leading up to Chapter 8 in Augustine’s *Confession*.¹¹ We are told about his “silent” encounters with ordinary Christians, his search for meaning in the philosophers, his growing disillusionment with life, , and most especially, his growing sense of being “enslaved” to his own passions of destruction—all the exact sorts of things that were typical of a “first phase” leading to Christian conversion in that era as per the

⁸ Sommer, p. 112.

⁹ Sommer, p. 109.

¹⁰ Sommer, states about the power of observing Christian suffering: “The knowledge that the Christians were serious people who were being wickedly oppressed by the government caused many people who were already having grave doubts about the direction their culture was taking, to explore Christianity further... the patient endurance of the martyrs caused many conversions on the spot, particularly among soldiers who were given the task of carrying out the executions.” P.109.

¹¹ c.f. “Addendum” for a brief review of Chapters 1-8.

conversion narrative of Justin Martyr and Cyprian as per their *Dialogue with Trypho* and *Letter to Donatus* respectively.¹² This all culminates in Chapter eight and the famous “garden” experience -- a decision to be sure, but not yet to become a Christian, only a Christian seeker/learner as we will see!

Phase 2: Pre-Conversion Participation in the Church as a Leaner-Seeker

After Augustine’s garden “decision,” Augustine was clearly taken with the teaching of the Bible. He remembered how “the words of your scriptures were planted firmly in my heart and on all sides you were there like a rampart to defend me.” He could revel in the philosophical idea of eternal life as entirely plausible, if not also attractive, to Augustine. And so as someone transitioning from Platonism to *Christianism*, he further confessed, “I had now been rid of all my doubts about an incorruptible substance from which all other substance takes its being.” HOWEVER, according to Augustine,

*My worldly life was all confusion. My heart had still to be rid of the leaven which remained over (1Cor.5:7) I should have been glad to follow the right road, to follow our Savior himself, but still I could not make up my mind to venture along the narrow path.*¹³

What exactly was the “narrow path” that Augustine was struggling to walk? And what was he still lacking? Curiously, it is at this very point that Augustine initiated a conversation with a pastor named “Simplicianus” (the spiritual father of Ambrose) wherein Augustine is instructed in the way to Christian conversion. More precisely, Simplicianus tells Augustine about the conversion of Victorinus in so far as it was viewed as illustrative of Christian conversion in that day. It led to a significant second phase of Augustines narrative to Christian faith.

According to Simplicianus, Victorinus was a “studied and respected philosopher and member of the Senate in Rome” during the 3rd century. But to the point, he was a man who at the time of his encounter with Simplicianus was *publically* still a worshiper of “idols,” even as he continued to publically defend these practice into old age.” However, “privately” (and this is significant!), we are told how “he was *taken* with the teachings of Christian faith.” Of course, this was exactly where Augustine was in his own journey at this stage of his narrative—thus the significance of his conversation with Simplicianus. And to the present point, according to Simplicianus to Augustine, Victorinus was NOT a Christian, not yet! As remembered by Augustine:

Privately, as between friends, though never in public, he [Victorinus] used to say to Simplicianus, “I want you to know that I am now a Christian.” Simplicianus used to reply “I

¹²c.f. Addendum—The Conversion of Justin Martyr and Cyprian taken from Sommers. P. 113ff.

¹³ *Confessions*, p. 157.

shall not believe it or count you as a Christian until I see you in the Church of Christ.” At this, Victorinus would laugh and say, “Is it then the walls of the church that make the Christian?”

Simplicianus went on to explain to Augustine how this conversation happened over and over again between he and Victorinus, and how each time, Simplicianus would give the same answer, to which Victorinus would give the same reply about the “walls.” As explained to Augustine, “He was afraid of offending his proud friends who worshipped heathen gods and he thought that a storm of hostility would break upon him from the peak of their Babylonian dignity.” (sound familiar?). But then one day, and “quite unexpectedly and without warning” according to Simplicianus, it happened. Victorinus turned to him and said

Let us go to the church, I want to be made a Christian.

Now, at this point in the story, we should be careful to inquire as to what exactly Victorinus was requesting? Was it simply to go to church on Sunday to a worship service? Not hardly! We are told how Simplicianus, unable to contain his joy, went with him to the church” where “*he was instructed in the first mysteries of the faith.*”¹⁴

Now at this point, Augustine assumes much on the part of the reader in so far as the norm of that day. For as was codified into the church polities of that day, the request by Victorinus to Simplicianus was to be “sponsored” to the church in order to become what was known as a “catechumen” wherein he could become a student of the “mysteries of faith” leading to Christian conversion. As a catechumen, Victorianus would have participated in the church as a learner/seeker in order to study the Christian faith together with experiencing its worship and community. It was a process that could take as long as three or more years even, wherein by participating in the church, it was believed to be participating in the very “womb” of God leading to true Christian conversion!¹⁵

In the *Apostolic Tradition* for instance, and due in part to the threat of persecution and spies seeking to locate church leaders, the church would not initially welcome the candidate with open arms... but would subject him/her to an elaborate set of rites and exams in order to become a “hearer” (catechumen/seeker) in the church. . *The Apostolic Tradition* described it this way.

Those who are newly brought forward to hear the Word shall first be brought before the teachers at the house, before all the people assemble. Then they will be questioned concerning the reason that they have come forward to the faith. Those who bring them will bear witness

¹⁴ *Confession*, p. 160

¹⁵ c.f. below in Part 3.

concerning them as to whether they are able to hear. They shall be questioned concerning their life and occupation, marriage status, and whether they are slave or free...¹⁶

Notice again, those being brought forth in this instance are those who were coming to “Hear the word,” as will be distinguished by another rite of entrance for those who will come to “be baptized” and formally entered into the church as a Christian (or a “kneeler”—c.f. phase 3). During this “hearer” phase, they were still not full members of the church but would actively participate in the life of the church—to a point! For instance, they were not allowed to pray publicly, and they were not allowed to partake of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

The catechumen may not take part in the Lord's Supper. At every meal, those who eat shall remember him who invited them, because he requested that they might come under his roof.¹⁷

As to what the catechumen was taught during this phase of conversion? This was largely determined by the particular circumstances facing a particular congregation, but of course always included a thorough review of the teachings contained within the Apostles’ Creed to be eventually recited at his/her baptism. As Sommer notes:

Justin Martyr emphasized both “faith and life” teachings... Later, Irenaeus emphasizing doctrinal teaching to combat Gnosticism. Cyprian was concerned with spiritual foundation of doctrine and morality... Origen developed a comprehensive biblical catechesis... and a scheme to work through all the major passages of the Bible in a three year period¹⁸.

After a period of time, the catechumen (seeker) was judged to be ready for full inclusion into the Christian community and conversion to Christian faith, and would engage in the third and final phase of conversion as a “kneeler.”¹⁹ And this was exactly the way Augustine remembers the story of Victorinus, even as it perfectly mirrors Augustine’s narrative to Chrsitain conversion as well.

Phase 3- Baptismal Conversion

As noted by Weber,

¹⁶ *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus of Rome*. Located at www.bombaxo.com/hippolytus.html. A translation by based on the work of Bernard Botte (*La Tradition Apostolique*. Sources Chretiennes, 11 bis. Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1984) and of Gregory Dix (*The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr*. London: Alban Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Section 27, *The Apostolic Tradition*.

¹⁸ Sommer, p. 118

¹⁹ Interestingly, this third phase eventually led to the practice of what is today called “Lent.” In the early church, most baptisms occurred on Easter Sunday, such that the period leading up to Easter was characterized by asceticism, daily fasting and prayer, even exorcism rites to be rid of spiritual forces of bondage that could thwart their Christian faith and practice !)

In the early Church, this process of conversion was ordered around the rites that culminated in baptism and entrance into the Christian community. Through these rites the new Christian experienced Christ as Lord over the powers of evil.²⁰

Having completed a learning and participation phase as a “hearer,” the catechumen would again be sponsored for the purpose of Christian baptism such as to undergo another series of exams. Accordingly, the *Apostolic Tradition* stated:

When they are chosen who are to receive baptism, let their lives be examined, whether they have lived honorably while catechumens, whether they honored the widows, whether they visited the sick, and whether they have done every good work.. If those who bring them forward bear witness for them that they have done so.²¹

The candidate would then enter into an intense period of spiritual preparations to include rites of asceticism, exorcism fasting, prayer and continued study.

From the time at which they are set apart, place hands upon them daily so that they are exorcised. When the day approaches on which they are to be baptized, let the bishop exorcise each one of them, so that he will be certain whether each has been purified... Those who are to receive baptism shall fast on the Preparation of the Sabbath... They shall be commanded to pray and kneel... When he has finished exorcising them, he shall breathe on their faces and seal their foreheads, ears and noses. Then he shall raise them up.²²

Returning then to the story of Victorinus, this whole process, was described as a process *in order to* “enter into God’s grace.”

Finally the time came for making his profession of faith. At Rome those who are about to enter into your grace usually make their profession in a set form of words which they learn by heart and recite from a raised platform in view of the faithful, but Simlicianus said that the priests offered to allow Victorinus to make his profession in private, as they often did for people who seemed likely to find the ceremony embarrassing. But Victorinus preferred to declare his salvation in full sight of the assembled faithful. For there was no salvation in the rhetoric which he taught, and yet he had professed it in public. If he was not afraid of uttering his own words before a crowd of madmen, why should he be freighted to name your word before your meek flock? So when he mounted the platform to make his profession, all who knew him joyfully whispered his name to their neighbors,... there can have been none who did not know him, and the hushed voices of the whole exultant congregation joined in the murmur “Victorinus, Victorinus.” They were quick to let their joy be heard when they say him, but just as quickly came to hush as they waited to hear him speak. He made his declaration of the true faith with splendid confidence, and all would gladly have seized him in their arms and clutched him to their hearts. But it was with the arms of love and joy that they seized him and made him their own! (no identity, no communion!!) ²³

²⁰ Robert E. Webber, *What is Ancient Future Evangelism?* From: *Theology, News and Notes*- used by permission ©2004 by Fuller Theological Seminary

²¹ Section 20, *The Apostolic Tradition*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Confessions*, p. 161.

Evidently, Augustine's counsel with Simplicianus and the story of Victorinus had its intended effect. Augustine became a catechumen (as per the big decision in Chapter 8), even as we get an insider's perspective on what this involved internally. Augustine confessed, *"I went to your church whenever I had time from my work, which was a painful load upon my shoulders... In meeting with the monks, my mind was being divested of the world as could presently be seen..."* He further wrote:

O LORD, my Helper and Redeemer, I shall now tell and confess to the glory of your name how you released me from the fetters of lust which held me so tightly shackled and from my slavery to the things of this world.

The catechumen period was no doubt filled with discovery, confirmation and yes, exorcism of internal idols of destruction for Augustine. And yet Augustine still confessed his longing to be fully united to Christ's love by public profession and Christian baptism into the church.

I was new to your true love, I as a catechumen living at leisure in that county house with Alypius, a catechumen like myself and my mother, who never left us... How I cried out to you when I read those Psalms! How they set me on fire with love of you! I was burning to echo them to the world, if only I could, so that they might vanquish men's pride

During this time of learning/seeking as a catechumen, it is clear that Augustine had STILL not fully experienced God's grace in Christian conversion. For during this period, he once wrote Ambrose for advice on books to read "so that I might be better prepared and more fitted to receive so great a grace."²⁴ Finally, after an undisclosed period of time, Augustine was evidently "passed" for entrance into the final stage of conversion culminating in Christian baptism. He described himself as "on the point of being converted," but again, not yet converted!

In fact I was on the point of being converted when, at long last, my period of waiting came to an end. To me that time seemed to drag on day after day, because I was longing for respite and the freedom to give voice to the song that swelled up deep within me: true to my ear's promise, I have eyes only for you, I long, lord, for your presence."

Longing for the full and salvific presence of God, Augustine was finally baptized by Ambrose on Easter, April 24, 387, together with many others. According to the church polity of that day, the event would have more or less proceed as follows:

At the hour in which the cock crows, they shall first pray over the water. When they come to the water, the water shall be pure and flowing, that is, the water of a spring or a flowing body of water. Then they shall take off all their clothes. The children shall be baptized first. All of the children who can answer for themselves, let them answer. If there are any children who cannot answer for themselves, let their parents answer for them, or someone else from their family. After this, the men will be baptized. Finally, the women, after they have unbound their hair, and removed their jewelry. No one shall take any foreign object with themselves down into the water.

²⁴ Sommer, p. 189.

It is especially instructive to note the “effecting” language that is used vis-à-vis the waters of baptism in the liturgy of that day. First, the pastor would anoint the recipient with “oil of thanksgiving.” This would include a final rite of exorcism whereby the candidate would say: “I renounce you Satan, all your service, and all your works.” After this, the bishop would respond by anointing each candidate saying, “Let every evil spirit depart from you.” The pastor would then proceed to baptize each recipient, and was instructed in the following manner:

The pastor shall “lay his hands on each of them, asking, “Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?” And the one being baptized shall answer, “I believe.” He shall then baptize each of them once, laying his hand upon each of their heads. Then he shall ask, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose on the third day living from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, the one coming to judge the living and the dead?” When each has answered, “I believe,” he shall baptize a second time. Then he shall ask, “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Church and the resurrection of the flesh?” Then each being baptized shall answer, “I believe.” And thus let him baptize the third time.”²⁵

What was Augustine’s own commentary on this whole event? Here again, as the culmination of a long journey to faith, he could finally say:

“We were baptized and all anxiety as to our past life fled away.”²⁶

And as has been shown by reference to the ancient church polity of that day, all of this was considered the “ordinary” way to Christian conversion. The key point in all of this is that it was not until Book 9, not 8, and Augustine’s sacramental entrance into the Church of Jesus Christ, that Augustine’s conversion to Christ was viewed as complete. To be sure, the Christian life will continue in its struggle against sin through ongoing confession and faith renewed over and over again as told in the remaining portion of Augustine’s narrative, but the issue of Augustine’s assurance by the grace of God had been settled—Augustine’s conversion was complete!

Part 3: Theological Reflection and Implications for Church Polity:

Pagan converts to the [Christian] mainstream did not, for the most part, first understand the

²⁵ *The Apostolic Tradition*, Section 21. Afterward, when they have come up out of the water, they were to be anointed by the elder with the Oil of Thanksgiving, saying, “I anoint you with holy oil in the name of Jesus Christ.” Then, drying themselves, they would dress and afterwards gather in the church where the bishop would then say in the company of the whole church: “Lord God, you who have made these worthy of the removal of sins through the bath of regeneration, make them worthy to be filled with your Holy Spirit, grant to them your grace, that they might serve you according to your will, for to you is the glory, Father and Son with the Holy Spirit, in the Holy Church, now and throughout the ages of the ages. Amen. This would follow with yet another anointing of oil and the laying on of hands ceremony saying “ I anoint you with holy oil in God the Father Almighty, and Christ Jesus, and the Holy Spirit” followed then with the greeting of “ the kiss of peace.”

²⁶ *Confessions*. Book 9, chapter 6.

faith and then decide to become Christians; rather, the process was reversed: they first decided and then they understood. More precisely, they were first attracted by the Christian community and form of life. The reasons for attraction ranged from the noble to the ignoble and were as diverse as the individuals involved, but for whatever motives, they submitted themselves to prolonged catechetical instruction in which they practiced new modes of behavior and learned the stories of Israel and their fulfillment in Christ. Only after they had acquired proficiency in the alien Christian language and form of life were they deemed able intelligently and responsibly to profess the faith, to be baptized” Only later, when Christianity became socially dominant, did this kind of catechesis disappear.²⁷

As was the experience of early Christian converts, even codified into the church polities of that era, that the church was not merely the source of mission (phase 2), but the locus mission (phase 2 and 3). Accordingly, one of the common ways to describe the church was as the “womb” of God wherein Christian faith was both conceived and nurtured. Cyprian’ famous way of saying it went like this:

She is one mother, plentiful in the results of fruitfulness: from her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are animated... Whoever is separated from the Church is separated from the promises to the Church. Nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ... He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother. If any one could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside of the Church.²⁸

To be sure, as seen in the case of Augustine, the journey to Christian faith was not merely intellectual but relational and even sacramental as to involve a series of decisions including the decision to participate in the church *in order to* become converted and to experience full union with Christ. Christian conversion was not a mere transition from one philosophy to Christian philosophy, although it involved that, but a transition from participation in one linguistic and cultural world to another, from being enslaved to exorcised! Augustine’s longing for God’s presence was to involve his mind, but also his community and ritual participation in the mystical presence of God. George Webber observes about the early church:

The Church, far from being a mere aggregate of human persons, was, from the standpoint of evangelism, the mother in whose womb God’s children are born, the mother who offers her breast for nurture and sustenance.

²⁷ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984) p. 132

²⁸ Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (c.250 AD), "On the Unity of the Church" Free Domain, located at www.philthompson.net/pages/library/unity.html

This idea of the church as the “Mother of God” was derived from both the Old and New Testaments based on the symbol of church as “bride” of God.²⁹ Accordingly to become a Christian was to be “born” of God in the womb of the church.

This image of gestation appears as early as the second century in the First Apology of Justin Martyr, a work written for the Emperor Titus to explain the Christian faith. Justin describes the Church as a womb, drawing an analogy between the water of baptism and the “moist seed” of conception. In the womb of the Church, conversion to Christ is conceived, and the water of baptism—which is the unique possession of the Church, symbolically represents the creation of new life.”³⁰

And to the present point in relation to missions today, Lesslie Newbigin affirms how

The church is not the source of witness, it is the locus of witness.... The presence of a new reality, the presence in the shared life of the church of the spirit who is the arrobion of the kingdom, has become possible because of what Jesus has done, because of his incarnation, his ministry as the obedient child of his father, his suffering and death, his resurrection, AND his ascension into heaven and his session at the right hand of God... It’s visible embodiment will be a community that lives by this story, a community whose existence is visibly defined in the regular rehearsing and reenactment of the story which has given it birth, the story of the self-emptying of God in the ministry of life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Its visible center as a continuing social entity is that weekly repeated event in which believers share bread and wine as Jesus commanded, as his pledge to them and their pledge to him that they are one with him in his passion and one with him in his victory...³¹

The theological and subsequent missiological ramifications of all this is quite profound within an emerging context that is in many ways reminiscent of the early church. For instance, the transition from modernity to post-liberal/modernity is in many ways a transition from what George Lindbeck describes as the cognitive and experiential-expresses epistemologies of modernism (rationalism, individualism respectively) to a more *extratextual* approach. What this means is that the emphasis in religious faith moves from a purely propositional and subjectivist foundation to “those respects in which religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures.” In other words,

Meaning is constituted by the uses of a specific language rather than being distinguishable from it. Thus, the proper way to determine what “God” signifies, for example, is by examining how the word operates within a religion and thereby shapes reality and experience rather than by first establishing its propositional or experiential meaning and reinterpreting or reformulating its uses accordingly... meaning is more fully intratextual in semiotic systems (composed, as they entirely are, of interpretive and communicative signs,

²⁹ C.f. Isaiah 61-62, Jeremiah 5, 33, Eph. 5:21ff, Rev. 21:9)

³⁰ C.f. Webber, who references *Tertullian On Baptism 1, ANF 3:669–79.*, c.f. Michael Dujarier, “A Survey of the History of the Catechumate,” in *Becoming a Catholic Christian*, ed. William J. Reedy (New York: Sadlier, 1981) 19ff.

³¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, Ch. 10, p. 120

symbols and actions) then in other forms of ruled human behavior...³²

In other words, “faith” is discovered within its vernacular use vis-à-vis a living communal expression less in the abstract sense. Lindbeck concedes that this approach is NOT to imply relativism or fideism contra universal or foundational standards and judgments in truth and practice. Rather it is that the universal truths or “elements” of faith are necessarily “formed” within a cultural expression or “church.” Given this, “faith” is something that one acquires as much by participating in it as thinking about it—not either-or but both-and! Or, stated differently, Christian conversion is as much a philosophical event (stage one) as a communal and even ritualistic event (stage two and three).

And so in the language of David Ferguson,

The time has therefore come to bear witness to the specific virtues of the Christian life through reference to its setting within the church under the guidance of Holy Scripture and the lordship of Jesus Christ. Christian witness in this social context bears the character not of seeking common ground with those who dwell extra muros ecclesiae [outside the walls of the church] but of articulating a vision that is distinctively and sometimes counter to the prevailing culture.”³³

Lesslie Newbigin wants to think in terms of the church as a necessary “hermeneutic” to faith.

Likewise, Robert Webber will speak of “a gospel of liturgy.” He explains: .

Another principle of ancient evangelism in the early Church recognizes that external rites have the power to order inner experiences. This principle, which unites external action and internal reality, is rooted in the Christian doctrine of incarnation. The confession that the human and the divine are united in the person of Christ affirms that God can and does work through material and physical creation. The rites of initiation make God and his saving presence a reality through physical signs. In order to clarify this principle, I have articulated eight statements to illuminate the idea that external rites order inner experience... The rites are necessary elements of the process that not only represent the Christ event, but they also embody and accomplish the event.

Perhaps though it would surprise some who have read Calvin from a modernist context to discover that Calvin was perfectly aligned with this way of thinking vis-à-vis the church as the mother of God, not by mere influence, but by the mystical vivifying presence of God in/with/through the VISIBLE church even. He states:

We expect salvation from him — not because he stands aloof from us, but because engrafting us into his body he not only makes us partakers of all his benefits, but also of himself... you become a member of him, and hence one with him... It will never do to separate Christ from us, nor us from him; but we must, with both hands, keep firm hold of that alliance by which he has riveted us to himself. This the Apostle teaches us: “The body is dead because of sin; but the

³² Lindbeck, P. 114.

³³ David Ferguson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.1-2.

spirit is life because of righteousness,” (Rom. 8:10)... He tells us that the condemnation which we of ourselves deserve is annihilated by the salvation of Christ; and to confirm this he employs the argument to which I have referred, viz., that Christ is not external to us, but dwells in us; and not only unites us to himself by an undivided bond of fellowship, but by a wondrous communion brings us daily into closer connection, until he becomes altogether one with us... no extent of space interferes with the boundless energy of the Spirit, which transfuses life into us from the flesh of Christ.³⁴

The implications of this are significant, but at the very least:

1) The evangelist-pastor will more and more want to stress the importance of “participation” *in order to believe*” vs. rationalist framework for evangelism. As in the case of Clarissa, we must challenge the notion of modernity that the ONLY way to know something is through the empirical or rationalist method. AS in the case of many things such as human value and love, there is a kind of knowledge that is by participation in the real, living presence of a thing, less in thinking about it abstractly. God is “person” not just “concept.” We would then want to ask the question, “where then may he be found,” and in so doing, rediscovery the mediatorial body of Christ in the local and yes, vivifying presence of God in the church.

2) The church must “re-form” itself as to be more linguistically and culturally “vernacular” without diminishing the otherness of its inherent being. Contra the church growth tendencies, the church is not interested in being converted in order to convert—quite the contrary, it is the otherness of God in the church, and the subsequent power to set people free from the “post-modern yawn”³⁵ of enslavement to this world that the church must live out in her liturgies, her communities and her believes. But this needs to be done more and more as if the whole neighborhood were present! That is to say, be transcendent yet eminent! I think here of something G.K. Chesterton once said about the nature of romance. In his words, this romance is “the combination of something that is strange with something that is secure. We need so to view the world as to combine an idea of wonder with an idea of welcome.”³⁶

Addendum: Augustine’s “Phase One” of Christian Conversion

As per Book 1, it began at home for Augustin through his early childhood catechisms (in this regard, Augustine would have been a-typical for his era), an overly strict school master, and especially the impact of his devoted Christian mother, all coupled with his own growing sense of feeling enslavement to his passions. Augustine explains:

While still a boy I had been told of eternal life promised to us by Our Lord, who humbled himself and came down amongst us proud sinners. AS a catechumen, I was blessed regularly from birth with the sign of the Cross an was seasoned with God’s salt, for, O Lord, my mother placed great hope in you... But my sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, beauty, and truth not

³⁴ First quote: Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1559*, ed. J. T. McNeill and F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.2.24. c.f. Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament*, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953). Second Quote: John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum*, 37:4

³⁵ Joey Earl Horstman, “Channel Too: The Postmodern Yawn,” *The Other Side*, vol. 29, no.3 (May-June 1993), p. 35.

³⁶ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (PLACE: John Lane Company, 1908), p. 5, available at www.ccel.org/c/chesterton/orthodoxy/orthodoxy.html (accessed Aug. 2004).

*in him but in myself and his other creatures, and the search led me instead to pain, confusion and error.*³⁷

In book two and three, the perception of being enslaved to his passions continued to intensify through his adolescence into his early years after moving to Carthage in order to study law.

*A cared of nothing but to love and be loved... beyond affections of one mind for another, beyond the arc of the bright beam of friendship. Bodily desire, like a morass, and adolescent sex... my body's appetites and plunged me in the whirlpool of sin. More and more I angered you, unawares.*³⁸

*I went to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of Lusts. For although my real need was for you, my God, who are the food of the soul, I as not aware of this hunger... I exhausted myself in depravity, in the pursuit of an unholy curiosity... I was at the top of the school in rhetoric. I was pleased with my superior status and swollen with conceit.*³⁹

In books 4 and 5, while still in Carthage, the focus turns most especially to his intellectual questions and inquiry wherein he describes himself as being “led astray, as with leading others astray,” and yet co-mingled with various early intellectual encounters with writings that, looking back, caused within him a growing sympathy to Christian teaching as well—for instance the writings of Cicero. During this period, Augustine was especially influenced by the writings of Faustus, a Manichean bishop. In so far as it represented a fully developed intellectual system of both science and religion, and given its academic “charm” and “eloquence,” Augustine was initially swept away by it. But then in search of greater fame and fortune, Augustine moved to Milan, where he inadvertently encountered the teachings of Ambrose, bishop of Milan “who was known throughout the world as a man whom there were few to equal in goodness...so that I might unknowingly be led by him to you.”⁴⁰

By the time we get to book six and seven, Augustine could say “I was not a Catholic Christian, but at least I was no longer a Manichee.”⁴¹ In personal terms, the narrative details the many ways that Augustine’s ambitions were being frustrated, even as some of his ambitions were at the time informed by a Christian framework.

*I was eager for fame and wealth and marriage, but you only derided these ambitions. They caused me to suffer the most galling difficulties but the less you allowed me to find pleasure in anything that was not yourself, the greater, I know, was your goodness to me.*⁴²

³⁷ Confessions. p. 30, 40-41

³⁸ Ibid. p. 45.

³⁹ Ibid. P. 55,57,58

⁴⁰Ibid. p. 107

⁴¹ Confessions, p. 111.

⁴² Ibid. p. 118, 152-156,

Intellectually, Augustine became enchanted with Platonism which in turn prepared him for a sympathetic reading of the apostle Paul:

In them (Platonic writings) I read—not of course word from word, though the sense was the same and it was supported by all kinds of different arguments—that (and he quotes scriptures concerning Christian faith.. Word becoming flesh... etc. etc.)... I began to search for a means of gaining the strength I needed to enjoy you, but I could not find this means until I embraced the mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ and concludes “it was wonderful how these truth came home to me when I read the least of your apostles an the thought of your works had set my heart trembling.”

Addendum: The Conversion of Justin Martyr and Cyprian

In the case of Justin Martyr, Sommer explains the special importance of reading various philosophical writings toward an openness to Christian ideas—moving from Stoicism to Pythagoreanism to Platonism—and lengthy private conversations with an old man who then led him to discover the Old Testament “as superior to philosophers. This all brought Justin to conclude:

Straightway a flame was kindled in my soul; and a love of the prophets, and of those men who are friends of Christ, possessed me, and whilst revolving his words in my mind, I found this philosophy alone to be safe and profitable.... For they possess a terrible power in themselves, and are sufficient to inspire those who turn aside from the path of rectitude with awe, while the sweetest rest is afforded those who make a diligent practice of them.” (Sommer, P. 113)

Noteworthy of Justin Martyr’s first phase to conversion was, the influence of seeing Christians suffer, as was also typical of that era and demonstrated as well in the case of Augustine. For Justin explained that just as he was “delighting in the doctrines of Plato, and heard the Christians slandered” he also “saw them (Christians) fearless of death, and all other things which are counted fearful” such that Martyr “perceived that it was impossible that they could be living in wickedness and pleasure.... For what sensual or intemperate man, or who that counts it good to feast on human flesh, could welcome death that he might be deprived of his enjoyments.” Sommer, p. 113.

In the case of Cyprian, one can identify almost the same sort of journey as the earlier conversion story of Justin Martyr and the later conversion of Augustine. In Cyprian’s instance, he was born into one of the most preeminent families of North Africa and raised within an extremely wealthy lifestyle. And yet sounding very much like Augustine after him, through his encounters with Christians and Christian philosophers, together with a growing sense of brokenness in terms of being enslaved to his prestige and privilege, Cyprian found himself attracted to Christian faith.

When does he learn thrift who has been used to liberal banquets and sumptuous feasts. And he who has been glittering in gold and purple and has been celebrated for his costly attire, when does he reduce himself to ordinary and simple clothing... The one who has felt the charm of the faces and of civic honors shrinks from becoming a mere private and inglorious citizen. The man who is attended by crowds of clients, and dignified by the numerous association of an officious train, regards it as a punishment when he is alone.

It is inevitable as it ever has been, that the love of wine should entice, pride inflate, anger inflame, covetousness disquiet, cruelty stimulate, ambition delight, lust hasten to ruin, with allurements that will not let go their hold. I was held in bonds by the innumerable errors of my previous life, from which I did not believe that I could be possibly be delivered, so I was disposed to acquiesce in my clinging vices; and because I despaired of better things. I used to indulge my sins as if they were actually parts of me, and indigenous to me. (Sommer p. 114-115)