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## Chritian Confusion: an Anthropological Analysis of the Christian Conversion Experience

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UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

CHRISTIAN CONFUSION:  
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CHRISTIAN CONVERSION  
EXPERIENCE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE MCDONNELL-BARKSDALE HONORS COLLEGE

BY  
ELIZABETH CROWLEY

OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI  
JULY 3, 2001

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DR. ROBBIE ETHRIDGE  
ADVISOR

---

DR. CHARLES R. WILSON  
FIRST CHAIR

---

DR. JUDSON D. WATSON  
SECOND CHAIR

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Conversion is a tenuous subject and Christian conversion even more so. In conversation it seems that people either become very defensive or very quiet when religion is the topic of discussion. Until about two years ago, I was the quiet type when religion was discussed; it was then that my own conversion experience began. This experience has led me to examine the conversions of others and to delve into the scholarly sources on conversion as well. And so I challenged myself to go outside the normal comfort zone and ask other new Christians how and why they have made such changes in their lives. The cause and effect of conversion is of particular interest to me, and especially at the intersection of adulthood and conversion. The stresses of college and first independence often affect college-aged Americans; only a few convert to Christianity during this time. When young adults are sent off to college the sudden responsibility can be startling and unwanted. According to psychologists, natural developmental stages often coincide with religious conversion (Rambo 1993: 157). I plan to study these young adults' conversions, focusing mainly on the progression of their conversion experiences.

In examining the process of conversion for young adults in college I will employ the steps of conversion as outlined by Lewis R. Rambo in his book *Understanding Religious Conversion*. However, while Rambo uses a seven-stage model consisting of Context, Crisis, Quest, Encounter, Interaction, Commitment, and Consequences (Rambo 1993: 17), I have decided to follow an abbreviated format for conversion including Context, Crisis, Commitment, and Consequences.

Context supplies setting and motive for conversion. Information regarding the historical and sociological background of each participant illuminates the possible influences for conversion. Most importantly situational explanation gives clues as to the stimulus that suggest spiritual change as the resolution to crisis. The Crisis stage of conversion gives shape and meaning to the causes of conversion. In this stage converts experience scenarios that change their perspective on spirituality. The catalysts for crisis can range from a near death experience to a desire for change in one's life. After the convert undergoes a crisis he or she must decide to commit him or herself to a new lifestyle and belief system. This entails submission to the will of God as dictated by the church organization; usually this submission requires a ritual act of conversion such as baptism. The consequences of this conversion are evident through new practices and belief systems (Rambo 1993: 168-169).

The origin of conversion interests me particularly because without it there would be no cause for conversion. From study, experience, and research it seems that trauma is the most frequent cause for spiritual growth (Conway and Siegelman 1979: 12). Trauma or crisis can take many forms. Rambo explains that the catalysts for crisis are not always life-altering events but instead can be small issues that are the last proverbial straw for the future convert. So it follows that I will attempt to explain why and how these college students chose Christianity and not therapy or a different religion instead.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The book, *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, by Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, was especially useful to my project for its views on the universality of enlightenment. *Snapping* relates the moment between crisis and commitment to many other cultural phenomena; in ancient Greece the experience is called *kairos* or divine enlightenment, and there are similar phenomena in various other religions including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism to name a few. Conway and Siegelman give a natural explanation to these transcendental moments:

Stripped of its supernatural components, it is simply a moment of fundamental human growth, of overwhelming feeling and understanding when an individual pushes through to those higher levels of consciousness that distinguish us as human beings. For the prophet, the genius, and the average citizen alike, life moves forward in such sudden leaps, peak moments and turning points. [1979: 38]

More specifically relevant is Charles Wilson's chapter entitled "Southern Religious Culture" from his book, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis*. Wilson explains the unique factors that constitute southern religious culture- Protestant dominance, Evangelicalism, Fundamentalism, moralism, and expressiveness. This understanding of culture lends context to the interviews collected. Wilson also explains the historical evolution of the Christianity of the South. During colonial times Anglicanism was the main

denomination of the southern colonies; but later, after the Revolutionary war, southerners had new options for their Christian beliefs (Wilson 1995: 4,5). The instigator of southern revivalism was the Cane Ridge Revival in Kentucky in August 1801. This evangelical belief system grew and soon reached all over the South; Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian Churches arose from its establishment. Later these denominations separated from their northern counterparts over the slavery issue. As stated by Wilson, "The religious separation was more enduring than the political separation. After the Civil War these three southern denominations transformed into distinct storehouses of southern culture" (Wilson 1995: 5). These churches were much more inclined toward expressive attitudes during church services than their northern counterparts and very focused on evangelicalism. All of the converts in my study were surrounded by this type of traditional religious fervor in the southern states and also contacted by these southern proselytizers during their conversions.

Also appropriate to the study of the context and history of conversion is the book *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience* by Samuel S. Hill. Hill explains the growth of the study of the religious dimension of the South. The relatively new holistic approach to culture and its deeply interwoven religion has caused a renewed emphasis on the study of southern religion as vital to the study of culture (Hill 1988: 2). Lifestyle, morality, politics and economics are all related to religion in different and inseparable ways. My participants' thick descriptions are living examples that religion and experience and family and politics cannot be realistically separated. The South's new economic status has caused intensified focus as well.

More people and money are finding their way to the South than any other region right now; conversely, southern religion has spread outward toward other regions (Hill 1988: 3).

Furthermore, in the chapter entitled “The Roots of Snapping”, Conway and Siegelman (1979) explain that though Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards began the call to conversion in the 18th century, and the experiences at Cane Ridge marked the burst of enlightenment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; nevertheless, the true launch of evangelicalism was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when “the experience of divine enlightenment reached out to touch great masses of people in the United States” (1979: 41). This fervor is generally acknowledged to have commenced on the first of January 1901. At a bible school in Topeka, Kansas a group of charismatic Christians, led by Charles Parham, “laid hands” on each other asking that the Holy Spirit reveal himself with the sign of “speaking in tongues” (Conway and Siegelman 1979: 42). The authors go on to explain the Biblical origin of speaking in tongues. In the New Testament, according to Acts, when Paul went to Ephesus he met some men who had been baptized by John but who had not yet received the Holy Spirit. When Paul laid his hands on them the Holy Spirit came over them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied (Conway and Siegelman 1979: 42).

These types of religious experience also came up during the interviews of the participants in my study. For help understanding these interviews about conversion I turned to Daniel Chandler’s excerpt on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. This hypothesis points out the difficulty in explaining one’s conversion experience. Sapir and Whorf were linguistic determinists who argued that language so molds



our communication that meaning is lost in translation, paraphrasing, or description. Moderate Whorfianists, like myself, concentrate on the potential for thinking to be influenced by language (Chandler 1994). For example, converts cannot fully explain the conversion of my subjects without learning the specific vocabulary of evangelical Christianity. Similarly, conversion experiences help the converts overcome these translation barriers by adjusting their way of thinking. This allows for learning a new vocabulary to describe the convert's experience. According to Sapir and Whorf the converts cannot fully explain their experiences to a non-convert because they use a separate dialect. The problem is lessened however, because I am also a convert.

The most important book by far has been *Understanding Religious Conversion* by Lewis R. Rambo. Rambo is especially thorough in his explanation of terms, methods, and models regarding conversion analysis. Rambo (1993) explains two different definitions of conversion: normative and descriptive. In normative conversion the experience is defined by the convictions of the relevant theological traditions. Descriptive conversion is only the observable facts of the process. Rambo clarifies his applicable description of conversion by stating:

For the purposes of this book, I suggest that conversion is what a group or person *says* it is. The process of conversion is a product of the interactions among the convert's aspirations, needs, and orientations, the nature of the group into which she or he is being converted, and the particular social matrix in which these processes are taking place. [Rambo 1993: 7]

For this thesis Rambo's position will serve as my explanation of conversion as well. Rambo also describes his holistic model of conversion that incorporates cultural, social, personal, and religious systems. Rambo explains the delicate balance of the subjective and objective portions of a conversion in a passage so important and fundamental to my viewpoint that I choose to represent it in its entirety.

However scholars may choose to delineate its causes, nature, and consequences, conversion is essentially theological and spiritual. Other forces are operative, but the meaning, the significance, and the goal are religious and/or spiritual *to the convert*. Phenomenologically speaking, interpretations that deny the religious dimension fail to appreciate the convert's experience, and attempt to put this experience into interpretative frameworks that are inappropriate, even hostile, to the phenomenon. Some psychological and sociological explanations of conversion and reductionist, and converts are rightly disconcerted when their experience is discounted, if not rejected, by the researcher. Nevertheless, there is value to the researcher in *bracketing* the theological dimensions in order to uncover the social and personal dynamics of conversion. Good scholarship should start with rich description of the phenomenon and with respect for its integrity. On the other hand, some religious scholars have a tendency to spiritualize the study of conversion by relegating everything that is not spiritual to the realm of the demonic or the irrelevant. [1993: 11]

Here Rambo explains that neither the scholastic nor the theological can take precedence over the other. Only with an even-handed balance of the spiritual and the analytical can a work merit use.

### 3. METHODS

Last spring I began this project as a documentary of the Christian experience. This research is based largely on 5 interviews with young adults who have had conversion experiences. I am representing my participants by their first names only for confidentiality. They are Kelly, Timmy, Stacey, Gene, and Liz. As a sixth personal resource, I have included my own experiences. All interviews were tape recorded on full sized cassette tapes in a hand-held tape recorder. I always carried extra batteries and checked the volume and recording quality at the beginning of each interview. My interviews usually lasted about an hour, and depended on the focus of the participants. The professionals at Alpha Reporting Corporation, 100 N Main St # 210, Memphis, TN, 901-523-8974, transcribed the tapes of these interviews.

In order to find people to interview I surveyed the Christian organization to which I belong and asked our leader for suggestions. My survey began as a different type of project; however, I used the contact information and some of the answers to locate willing participants. After finding possible subjects I enlisted my friend and organization leader, Liz, to help me pare down the group. She suggested that I interview Gene because he had an extraordinary experience, Kelly because she needed to talk about it, and Timmy because our backgrounds were similar; Liz also volunteered her own conversion experience. Later I interviewed Stacey whom I met socially and had known both before and after his conversion; this fact alone made me intensely curious about his transformation.

Objectivity is an oft-debated issue in the field of anthropology. All authors, ethnographers, or field researchers are biased by their previous experiences, personal likes and dislikes, and belief systems. I recognize that an agnostic psychologist or an evangelical minister would have equally different experiences in this study than I did. However, accepting the unavoidability of subjectivity is the first step in writing a useable, honest text that can educate other people without hiding the personal biases of the author. For these reasons I have included my own conversion experience in this thesis. Paul Bohannan and Dirk Van Der Elst address this issue of objectivity further in their book, *Asking and Listening: Ethnography as Personal Adaptation*.

The outline that follows is the interview guide I used during the interviews. I followed it generally but tried to keep the tone of the interviews engaging instead of cut and dried. I encouraged my subjects to explore each question thoroughly and respond honestly. Most subjects were enthusiastic and enjoyed being interviewed while a few were rather uncomfortable with the personal nature of the questions.

### Interview for Anthropology 334 Project

#### Theme/Main Goal of Interview:

To hear the story of how a person became a Christian and how they deal with college in that context.

#### Including:

- Christian childhood?
- Events/feelings that caused changes?
- Nature of the change: Sudden? Permanent?
- Changes college has caused?
- Coping mechanisms?

#### 1. Basic information:

- a. Age?

- b. Major?
  - c. Age when you became a Christian?
  - d. Hometown?
2. What was your childhood like, and how do you think it affected your spiritual life?
    - a. What was your hometown like? House? Family?
    - b. Family involved in Church? How?
    - c. What effect did your family's spiritual life have on your own spiritual life?
  3. What events or circumstances made you decide to start living your life for God?
    - a. Who helped you learn about God/ Who lead you to Christ?
    - b. How quickly was your lifestyle changed?
    - c. How did you explain your new behavior to your family and friends? How did they react?
  4. Once you accepted Christ's love what did you do?
    - a. Did you read the Bible?
    - b. Did you begin to attend Church more?
    - c. Did you pray more?
  5. Now that you've been in college for a while how has your spiritual life changed because of it?
    - a. What is the most difficult part of being a Christian college student?

Admittedly some of these questions are difficult to answer, especially within the pressure of an interview situation. Some of the problems I expected and tried to avoid were the haziness of memory and the invasive quality of the questions. For some of my participants their first conversion was in childhood and their renewal of faith was what they considered their true conversion, therefore remembering back to that first conversion was difficult for them. Also such deep questions were difficult to digest and respond to clearly. Because I wanted deep, honest answers and I knew the questions would be an obstacle at the interviews, I decided to prepare each of the participants before the interview: I e-mailed each participant a

copy of the interview guide the night before the interview so they could know what to expect and think about their answers beforehand.

As the purveyor of intimate questions, I felt uncomfortable during the interviews as well. The personal nature of conversation caused me to feel nervous and awkward at the anticipation of each interview; however, once the interview commenced the mood became much more casual. I still felt hindered by tact when dealing with issues such as drugs and sex, which came up at least obliquely in every interview. I let my informant's attitude be my guide on these topics. If my participant was more relaxed I proceeded with any questions I might have, conversely, if my participant stumbled over the issue I refrained from mentioning it in any obvious manner.

#### 4. CONTEXT

Context will help explain the varying pressures on those individuals that choose to convert to Christianity. The context of conversion lends clarity and shape to the converts' experiences. The chapter will also give a historical and cultural perspective on the factors that influenced these converts. Context is an unavoidable framework of experiences, traditions, habits, and histories. Every person has a multifaceted background of family life, learned customs, cultural institutions and more.

Circumstances at the onset of this experience are marked with both external and internal contexts (Rambo 1993: 20). The external forces that mold conversion include but are not limited to the political, social, economic, and religious domains. The religious domain is the most relevant force in the conversions I have documented. Those considered internal influences are not limited to motivation, experience, and aspiration; these internal factors will be examined during the analysis of crisis.

In my study most external factors varied little. All participants come from small towns where protestant Christianity was the main religious avenue. All participants were young adults when they went through their conversion experiences. Their ages were 13, 17, 18, 19, 20, and 20 when they began their conversions. All of my informants are white, middle-class Americans. They are mostly southern Americans, and all went *through their conversion experiences in the South, specifically in Mississippi*. However, other factors in the external

context varied widely. Liz and myself, for example, were raised in very church-oriented families while Gene and Stacey were not. There is little doubt that college requires a reevaluation of old friendships and new social selections. That is, when entering the new social context of college, all of the participants in my study found that friendships with other Christians fostered their relationship with God, while friendships with people who had other priorities hindered their attempts at a closer relationship with God. Whereas Kelly and Gene had Christian friends before their conversions, Timmy and Stacey and I had to reevaluate the friends we had after converting.

For an understanding of the historical and social context of religion the characteristics of southern religious culture must be examined. The homogeneous nature of southern religion distinguishes it from other regions of the United States. Protestantism though common to the entire south has developed in multiple ways. The National Council of Churches focuses on the social activism of the gospel, while Episcopalians and Lutherans have chosen to emphasize the liturgical tradition of worship, and Presbyterians and Congregationalists stress the theological dimension of Protestantism. Nevertheless, Evangelicalism is the most prominently stressed element of Protestantism in the South (Wilson 1995: 8).

Evangelicalism figures prominently in my data. My participants all expressed a desire to proselytize, whether through sharing their conversion experiences with others or by doing official missionary work. Whether this desire comes from a personal desire to help others experience a conversion, or if converts merely feel expected to proselytize because of the doctrine of their church is



uncertain. Southern religion focuses on the experiences of the Christian lifestyle and centers on the quest for salvation. “The dynamic of Evangelicalism is conversion, and proselytizing becomes not one aspect of religion but the central concern of individuals and the church as a community” (Wilson 1995: 8). For an example, the student Christian organization to which most of my informants and I belong is named Student Mobilization; their purpose is “To raise up laborers for Christ from the college campuses of the world,” and “To build up student laborers into future leaders.” The Student Mobilization strategy is the multiplication of Christians, and so they desire to “evangelize the campus, establish new believers, equip disciples, and export laborers for Christ” (Student Mobilization 2000).

Fundamentalism is another characteristic of southern religion. Fundamentalism is the observance of doctrines, creeds, and statements of belief. For example, many of my participants do not consume alcohol at all. This is in accordance with the fundamentalist belief of the infallibility of the Bible and the conservative theology that any alcohol at all is a sin: “Drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5: 21).

Moralism also defines the southern Protestant religions. Kelly was quick to point out that she “didn’t drink or anything,” before she was reaffirmed in her faith at college. This seems to indicate an ultra-awareness of sins and transgressions. Wilson explains it as “finger sins.” Those sins that a southern Christian can count up on his fingers are such sins (Wilson 1995: 9). Another example, from my own experiences, is the shocked look I received from other women when I went to

Sunday church services wearing a pantsuit instead of a skirt. In Connecticut I had worn pants to church frequently.

Finally and most notably, the expressiveness of southern Christianity clearly distinguishes it from the Christianity of other regions. Gene's church is especially vivacious in its worship; he says that they all sing and clap and dance during their services. Evangelicalism also encourages its members to spread the word about Christ and God. Southern Christians are encouraged and often instructed on talking about their faith. Testimonies or conversion stories are used as persuasive arguments for winning converts to Christianity. This expressiveness also translates into the warmth and friendliness of southern culture. I have often noticed the kindness and familiarity conveyed by southern Christians.

These elements of southern religion transfer into statistical distinctiveness regarding the South as an independent region.

Nine out of ten Southerners, for example, still identify themselves as Protestants, compared to only six out of ten non-Southerners. Nearly half of southern Protestants are Baptist, confirming the views of cultural geographer who categorize the South as one of the nation's most clearly defined religious regions. Southerners' responses to questions about religion on public opinion polls show a continued orthodoxy: they believe overwhelmingly in a personal, anthropomorphic God, in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, in Christ's second coming, and in life after death. One survey showed that 86 percent of southerners believed in the devil whereas only 52 percent of non-Southerners so believed. Southern Protestants show greater hostility to ecumenical involvement with Roman Catholics than do nonsouthern Protestants (Wilson 1995: 13,14).

Despite rapid modernization in the American South the Protestant orthodoxy of the region is woven tightly into the fabric of society. These characteristics of southern religion set the context for explaining the participants' pre-conversion experiences with religion.

## 5. CONVERSION NARRATIVES

After recognizing that conversion always occurs in context, it is important to be acquainted with the experiences of the converts. It is imperative, however, that the issue of narrative construct is examined prior to the evaluation of the accounts themselves. The speaker automatically molds any description of a personal conversion into a narrative; the story then consists of all of the parts that belong to a narrative. The steps of conversion outlined by Rambo also follow the system of narrative. Think of Context, Crisis, Commitment, and Consequences as exposition, conflict, and resolution, they are very similar progressions. Conversion must be examined within this narrative structure.

All information relays that involve circumstances and events and characters are automatically told in narrative form. Sometimes this is fostered by the desire to have an interesting, informative, and enjoyable conversion story to aid in evangelical work. The concept of language plays an integral part in this analysis, in part because there is a vocabulary shift that occurs after conversion and partly because as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis states:

We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (Whorf 1940: 214; his emphasis) (Chandler 1994).

With respect to this thesis, the speech community is the evangelical Christian community. I am in a privileged position to understand my interview participants because I, too, am a member of this speech community. Previous to my own conversion experience and exploration of faith I did not, or could not, *truly* understand the vocabulary of conversion because I had never ‘been saved’ or ‘walked with Christ’. The conversion experience enables the convert to transcend these restrictions and learn the new language of conversion.

This language of conversion along with the scholastic inquiry into the conversion experience causes the informant to relay a narrative that recounts his or her conversion. The complete accuracy of this response is subject to alteration because the form of experience must comply with the restrictions of a narrative voice. Each conversion, therefore, has exposition, conflict, and resolution, in addition to heroes, antagonists, anecdotes and a moral. According to David Yamane there are at least three elements of a narrative. First there must be a thematic selection of events to relate. Second those events must be ordered temporally, usually within the constraints of a beginning, middle, and end. Thirdly the events are subjected to a moral ordering (Yamane 2000). Yamane continues states that it is not enough to understand narrative as a factual account of facts with relevant connections between them. In fact, a group of experiences can only have meaning if they are sequenced within an inclusive theme. The selection of sequence is based on the end goal of the narrative; these facts are assigned meaning within the context of the individual’s life. Therefore, according to Yamane it is

necessary to examine the how individuals construct their conversion narratives. In addition Yamane makes this statement defending the narrative approach.

The narrative approach, while not denying that religious experiences have an objective existence, suggests that because experiencing is an ongoing temporal flow, its objective existence is fleeting. By the time the individual comes to understand the experience, it has past. What remains is the memory, the interpretation, the linguistification, the recounting, the emplotment, and the narrativization. This is the "data" which sociologists must study (Yamane 2000).

This project has been incredibly interesting and eye-opening for me. Each of my interviewees had an intensely personal story to tell. Kelly, Timmy, and Gene attend weekly meetings with Student Mobilization. Liz works for Student Mobilization as one of the women's leaders. I met Stacey as a freshman, and I had heard from a mutual friend that he had become a Christian in college. It is merely coincidence that three of the five interviewees came from divorced homes. The proportion is not indicative of any group, and I did not know that was the case until after I interviewed them.

Kelly is from Tupelo, MS and is 21 years old. She is a fashion merchandising and marketing major. She became a Christian at age thirteen but has been spiritually maturing rapidly in the last few years. Her mother, who is a dedicated member of their church, influenced her religious background. Kelly recalled the mornings before church with fondness: "Yeah, my mom was a really strong Christian, my dad went to church with us every once in a while. So my mom would get up in the mornings and my brother and I would watch 'Flipper' every

morning before church while we were waiting for my mom to get dressed. My mom had us really involved in church.” She also said later of her mother’s influence on her spiritual life: “I think if my mom hadn’t been a Christian and I hadn’t been raised around Christian friends and other families that were Christians then I probably wouldn’t have become a Christian at such a young age.”

Kelly’s conversion story is similar to most Baptist baptism stories but her maturation since her acceptance of Christ is incredible. Here is Kelly’s conversion in her own words:

I was at church one Sunday night, and for some reason I remember that I had on these jeans that had patches all over them of red and check or something and I had on red Keds and a big red bow in my hair. I think we had been having revival two weeks before and every time we had church I felt like I needed to go down. [Revival is a time when churches conduct an evangelical renewal of faith and worship. When Kelly says ‘go down’ she is talking about walking down the aisle to the front of the church where the entire congregation prays for you and you accept Jesus in front of the entire congregation.] I guess God was just working in my heart and that night, I don’t even remember what the sermon was about but I remember that he gave the invitation call I and was just standing there bawling, just crying so hard because I knew I wasn’t saved. I knew I needed Jesus so I went down front and Lee Mack, his wife was our youth minister— after church we went off in a room and he prayed with me and he asked me what I felt and why I felt this way and made sure I was on the right thinking process. So then we prayed and I accepted Christ.

Once Kelly had accepted Christ into her life she began to experience a spiritual change. “I think I felt different on the inside and maybe I started viewing my action different but I can’t look back and pinpoint a major, major difference as far as my actions. It wasn’t like I was drinking and then I stopped. It wasn’t like that. It was more little things like how I treated my parents and like how I treated my friends of course that’s not little but. It was more like my attitude and my love for people.” Regarding her personal changes, Kelly recalls that her youth affected the way that she changed.

I can think of like in high school to now is totally different. I remember thinking I need to love my brother more and be nicer to him and I guess the way I treated my parents just being more respectful and things like that. I don’t know if it has to be, but so many people they’re going down this path and they become a Christian and it’s like Errrr [sound and hand motions indicating a 180° degree turn] but in my heart I really feel like I accepted Christ at that point but I was just growing slowly. In my heart I felt the difference. I remember going to bed that night and thinking, ‘if I die I’ll go to heaven.’ I think more if you accept Christ at that age preachers drill in you so hard of ‘are you sure that you’re sure that you’re sure if you die right now you’re going to go to heaven?’ I remember us having revival before then- and sometimes when you’re a child you accept Christ for what he can do for you not what you can do for him. ‘Okay I accept Him, I can go to heaven.’ Your level of consciousness is not full; you don’t really know. It’s a childlike faith.

Just a few years after Kelly became a Christian her parents went through a bitter divorce and she moved in with her father and stepmother. Because of the



divorce in her sophomore year, she and her mom “had a lot of bad feelings for one another” and therefore very little contact during high school. However before going to college Kelly and her mom worked through their problems and have become best friends. Kelly’s mother is now one of Kelly’s spiritual mentors and she encourages her to seek God and give her life to Christ wholeheartedly. Even since the beginning of college Kelly has changed a lot.

For Kelly high school was hanging out with Christian friends but not necessarily talking about spiritual matters very often. Now she said that when she sees students on campus she wonders and is concerned about their spiritual health. “I’m more aware. If I see an international student I wonder what they practice or if they’re a Christian do they know Christ? In high school, I was more caught up in my own thing.”

Part of her new perspective has come from spending time with God and His word and some of it has been learned from Liz, who is a campus minister at Ole Miss. Kelly has been learning to let Christ into all areas of her life, especially the area of family. Kelly’s family had been in turmoil since the divorce; when her father had had an affair. This caused her mother to be very bitter and angry toward Kelly’s father. It was easier for Kelly to live with her father and not hear the negative things her mother was saying about her father. However, her father’s house wasn’t the best environment for a young Christian girl; her father and stepmother were much more liberal than Kelly and Kelly’s mother on issues like abortion, drinking, and teenage behavior. So Kelly had these two extreme environments with which to deal. When Kelly got to college and began to meet

with Liz it was very difficult for her to talk about her family at all but throughout that first year of college she learned that she needed to let God have control over her life.

Gene is a 21-year-old junior here at Ole Miss. His major is Chemical engineering and he plans on being a doctor. Gene grew up on a cattle ranch in Sumerall, MS. His family, which as of age eight consisted of his mother, stepfather, and two siblings, only went to church on holidays like Easter and Christmas. When I asked him how that affected his spirituality he said, "It made me earn it...which ended up being very positive for me." Gene then went on to explain that after he got his license he went from church to church in town trying to decide which to attend. Upon hearing Gene say that I felt the most appropriate question to ask next was, why choose church at all? Gene responded with his usual candor: "I'm not an idiot. I would look at people that were so-called Christians and they were happy. They had fulfillment. I've never seen someone who was truly happy who wasn't a Christian." Gene said that being spiritual has always been a calling in his life and that calling was aided by going to Camp Kanakuk one summer at the suggestion of his father. There at age fifteen he learned what Christianity encompassed and it helped guide him through the basics of Christianity. However, when Gene entered high school, alcohol and popularity and the rough, bad-boy lifestyle distracted him. Gene defined his high school experience as "drinking beer, doing drugs, and doing real bad thing with girls. I did every thing short of heroin and was hooked on amphetamines until three years ago. It was bad." And later Gene said of his high school days, "I was definitely doing a

lot of drugs and I didn't think I could be my best without them." Gene's conversion experience is unlike any of the other participants' experiences.

Gene had been dating a girl who went to Trinity Heights Church of God and so Gene was going to that church as well. This denomination of Christianity is very charismatic. They are usually rather boisterous worshippers and occasionally speak in tongues during the services. Also at that point he was starting to feel uncomfortable in his own life. As Gene put it, "I realized that I had some real bad stuff in my life that was just not good at all and it wasn't about me and it wasn't about drugs, it was about God." On the Sunday night service of Pentecost at Trinity Heights they had an altar call at the end of the service where people in the congregation can come forward and pray and have some private time with God away from the crowd up near the altar. That night Gene felt called to the front of the church and he went and knelt at the altar. They had never seen him at the front of that church before, yet the wife of the preacher laid her hands on his shoulder and prayed over him and another hand rested on his shoulder and another and another. The hands felt like a rush of energy through his body; he felt so good and so right. According to Gene, he was so filled with the Spirit that he stood up and raised his hands up in the air in fists and the preacher said to him "let it go, let it go," over and over again he grabbed Gene's hands and said "Let it go." Gene opened his hands and stood there in shock. He felt free from any bondage, from any sin, from any addiction to anything. He wanted to say a thousand things at once; he was trying to talk but he couldn't—The preacher said, "Just say it, I know what you're trying to do just say it, don't try to talk just say it." And Gene opened his mouth and another

language poured out and he said it. All of a sudden the energy went out of him and Gene hit the ground. "It felt like God had just passed by me." "I realized no drug could bring me to that point that I had reached on that floor." Gene considers speaking in tongues to be the perfect prayer when you have so much to say at once; also speaking in tongues allows you to tell God secrets without the devil hearing.

Since this change in his life Gene has seen his grades turn from C's to A's, his life has a purpose now, which is to be a medical missionary; he feels that he has been blessed continuously. He is a very outgoing person, gregarious and personable where as before he was more of a homebody who wasn't interested in people at all. Although Gene admits to backsliding a little bit in his spiritual life, he believes that he'll never fall away from God because he never wants to be in his previous wretched situation.

Gene had this life changing experience only four months before he went off to college so he didn't go "hog wild" in college, but he does feel that his biggest struggle in college is dealing with relationships and girls in general, especially, he says, girls at Ole Miss because they are so beautiful.

Timmy is from Tupelo, Mississippi, a junior in the school of Business majoring in Finance. Timmy is the third of three children. His parents and siblings were baptized when Timmy was in third grade; however, Timmy himself did not get baptized at that time. His parents wanted him to make his own decision, and he had decided against it. Timmy had been acting up and doing drugs for four years before he turned his life around. When he almost got caught drinking on a church retreat he knew it was time to stop.

Timmy said in our interview that his teachers and peers knew that he was a troublemaker, "When you live in a city that small, word gets around." On the church retreat, Timmy had brought some liquor with him, and he said that he is glad that he did. "That was a major turning point in my life. It wasn't a good decision, but I'm glad that I did choose to do that because if I hadn't I wouldn't have accepted Christ. I couldn't stop on my own, I'd tried before, and I couldn't quit. I knew I needed something more powerful than myself to quit." Timmy says that the alcohol wasn't the real problem. He had been unable to stop doing drugs. He was mentally addicted to marijuana. "The realization that I was a loser, that I knew I was a loser and that this was affecting my grades and my life. I had all these big goals and dreams, and I know I couldn't achieve them if that was my life."

At the Disciple Now retreat, which is a historically Baptist evangelical weekend, Timmy met with and talked to one of the spiritual leaders. He confessed his sins and talked about his problems and issues. That night they prayed together and Timmy invited Jesus to come into his life. Timmy became baptized and gradually turned his life around. He was not suddenly altered or immediately perfect. Timmy was still having problems with drinking and drugs; however, "After a couple of months, I'd quit and I was reading my Bible and I was actually listening for once at church."

Timmy said that he could see his life changing and his friends could tell the difference as well. Unfortunately these were the friends that Timmy had made while doing drugs and partying. They had turned their backs on him, not understanding that this change was a good thing. Timmy was able to deal with it,

however, because, in his words, "I just realized that in order for me to stop completely that I had to quit hanging out with these guys. I had to make new friends, and I did." Timmy believes that God placed these new friends in his life to help him adjust to his new life. Timmy said that his reputation at school and around the neighborhood also improved. Some of the students he had previously bullied when he was so unhappy were now his best friends. Timmy attributes their willingness to forgive him to their strong Christian faith. Timmy's attitude and personality had improved so much that he was elected to student government and as a senior he was nominated for class favorite. Timmy also saw a drastic improvement in his grades, and teachers and parents who had avoided him were now congratulating him. Nevertheless, the transition from high school to college was very difficult and was made even more difficult for Timmy by the end of a relationship and two deaths.

Right before college a lot of things were happening to me. I was growing in Christ and since I was saved I was reading my Bible, but a lot of things happened to me my senior year in high school. My girlfriend broke up with me that I had been dating for almost a year. She was the first Christian girl I'd ever dated, and my grandfather died, and one of my good friends committed suicide. I just got to a point to where I was questioning God. I said, "God why are you doing this to me?" And I eventually -- I got back into drinking. My freshmen year I drank, and I partied, and my sophomore year I drank, and I partied, and, uh -- my freshmen and sophomore year I went to community college, and then I transferred over here, and uh -- and I drank, and I partied, uh, part of first semester, but I also started coming to Student Mobilization every week.

When Timmy transferred to the University of Mississippi he met back up with his Christian friends from Tupelo. They began to bring him to Student Mobilization, a Christian organization on campus that focuses on supporting college Christians and helping them learn to live for Christ. Although Student Mobilization is non-denominational it has a significant Baptist bent because of the regional demographic strength of that denomination. Timmy was still drinking and partying but he was also getting back on track. Finally after a few of his Christian friends had seen him drinking and pointed out that he really was not that kind of person anymore, Timmy gave himself the final pep talk:

I started realizing, 'Timmy, if you want to be successful, you've got to quit doing this, you've got to quit going out every night, and blowing your parents' money, because they're paying for your school, and you're not doing anything. You're making Bs and Cs.' One of my friends just started witnessing to me and, trying to lift me up and, uh, invite me to come do stuff with them instead of, uh, going out with my other new friends that I had made, and uh, I eventually I came back to Christ; it was awesome.

Since then Timmy has continually grown in Christ. He has led Student Mobilization in many activities and last fall he had the opportunity to go back to the Discipline Now retreat as a counselor and to lead a young man to Christ. Timmy says that he mostly struggles with finding time to keep his relationship with God personal and daily. His reaction to those who don't believe in God bears repeating:

All these people that don't believe in God, they criticize Christians for not drinking and not partying and doing all this other stuff. I don't care. I don't care that they look down upon me because I know if I'm wrong then I have nothing to lose, but if I am right, you know, they have everything to lose.

Liz is originally from Tulsa, Oklahoma and graduated from the University of Arkansas with a degree in psychology. She is twenty-five years old and works as a campus minister at Ole Miss for the Student Mobilization organization. Liz marks the changes in her Christian perspective by two significant events: when she became a Christian at age eight and later when she really started growing considerably at age twenty.

At age eight while at vacation bible school Liz was shown an illustration of how Christ saves us from our sinfulness taking our burden of sin and giving us his clean heart instead. After seeing this she decide to "walk the aisle and have Christ come into my life." Now, in retrospect Liz wonders if she did it because she really understood that she needed Christ in her life or because all her friends were walking the aisle. Throughout her childhood and teen years Liz and her family went to church Wednesday nights, Sunday mornings, and Sunday nights. Her family was very involved with their church. However towards the end of high school Liz found herself steering away from God and following her friends instead, which led to a wild time until her sophomore year in college. As a sophomore at the University of Arkansas, she went on a retreat sponsored by Student Mobilization and, although she can't remember anything specific that changed her, she was transformed overnight and came back a totally different person. Her actions changed



dramatically “from the weekend before partying big time to never doing that again ever.” “God changed me.” “It’s not real easy for people to give things up overnight and I did.” Looking back now, Liz said that God had been preparing her for this change. She stated that her partying had slowed down, she and her boyfriend were not getting along, and God was preparing her to release her old way of life. God began to meet her needs and she didn’t try to rely on anything else anymore. Liz also says that the change in her was evident by her new actions and words. She began to talk about what she had been learning in the bible with her family and they knew she had changed. Liz also broke up with her boyfriend two weeks after she changed:

“I had had a boyfriend and I broke up with him two weeks after I changed. That was probably the hardest thing for me because I thought I was going to marry that guy, but his direction wasn’t going the same way as mine at all. [*Was he a Christian?*] I don’t know that he was a Christian, No. He said that he had become one the summer before but his life had never changed and I don’t really know; he never talked about it to me.”

Liz also felt that that relationship had no future in her new life because he wasn’t excited for her or interested in talking about her new experiences. Liz prayed for guidance from the Lord and decided that she couldn’t hold on to anything that was impeding her walk with God.

Liz says that her renewed faith changed her life in many ways. For example before she used to date what she calls “sketchy” guys, but afterwards her standard

changed and what she wanted in a guy changed. Liz also credits her great relationship with her family to her new faith. She used to lie to her parents and not care about her little brother and sister and not be interested in even seeing her family but after her change she “watched this love for her family start pouring out.” Liz also started experiencing a new love for all people; she wanted them to experience this love from Christ, too.

Liz’s environment at college was surprisingly positive. She flourished under the guidance of her new Christian friends and within the Student Mobilization group. On the other hand Liz was also living in the sorority house in an opposite environment as one of the only Christians in the house. Liz really struggled with knowing that some of her own sorority sisters and friends weren’t going to go Heaven with her. She also had trouble understanding why other Christians weren’t as interested as she was in going out and ministering to the spiritually lost. Liz feels that a heart for people, a compassionate concern for other people’s spiritual welfare, is something that all Christians should have and that develops over time. She, herself, prayed for her heart to be changed into a heart for people. As a Christian, Liz struggles the most with busy-ness and stressing over everything she has to do when she knows that God calls us to rest in Him and lay our concerns at his feet. Liz also made a very wise comment, which was— God, the creator of everything, is definitely the person she wants to handle things for her and not herself. Liz has been working for Student Mobilization for three years now and this summer she will be leaving staff to get married and go to seminary school in Jackson, Mississippi.

Stacey is a 21-year-old senior at the University of Mississippi; he is originally from Brookings, South Dakota. His major is philosophy and he is on scholarship from the Army Reserve Officer Training Corp. Next year he will begin active duty with the army. His time at college has been the most perception-changing time in Stacey's life; however, his family has had significant effect on his religious convictions as well.

As a child, Stacey's family could have been described as "holiday Christians." They were very busy raising their children, working, and keeping their marriage together so they made it to the Methodist church only on holidays. Later, when Stacey was in fifth grade and his brother was in seventh, his brother decided that God did not exist. So, in order to be contrary and to please his parents, Stacey decided that he believed in God. Later in high school when all that mattered was pleasing his older brother, Stacey did not believe in God either; nevertheless, it was "cool" to go to youth group and do after-school clubs like FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes), so Stacey did not quit going. As a bonus there were cute girls at both FCA and First United Methodist youth group. Stacey's structured high school life included studying, swim team, FCA, and youth group, but when Stacey got to college he started drinking—socially at first but boredom, unhappiness, and loneliness drove him to find solace in alcohol and drugs.

In January 1998 Stacey was attending the weekly meetings at the Baptist Student Union in order to encourage another student to join his fraternity. He was drinking and doing drugs almost daily. Stacey began to hit rock bottom; one weekend he was planning on two or three days of marijuana and alcohol; instead, he

mistakenly smoked some bad marijuana and got so drunk and high that he found himself immobile on his couch for three days. When he awoke and cleaned himself up, he thought, "Okay, now maybe there is a God, and I am just pissed off at him because he doesn't like me, so I am angry with God, with whatever is out there." That week Stacey went to the BSU but he was drunk and alone. The other students at the BSU didn't even notice or mind. That night when he came home his long-distance girlfriend called and "disassembled his world." She had decided that she did not love him, nor he her.

Stacey was devastated; his first thought was to climb to the roof of his seven-story dormitory and jump off. Stacey's practical side prevented him from doing so; he was concerned that it would not kill him. Immediately after he had considered suicide he said, "God started pulling on my heart strings then and said, 'Hey, listen up, bro. You know, there's a better way to live your life, and there's more out there than this.'" Stacey argued with God about hypocrisy, logic, philosophy, and he also asked, "How come there can't be many different roads to the same thing? What's wrong with the Jews? What's wrong with Hindu? Are you really going to tell me Gandhi's burning in Hell?" Then Stacey heard God say to him, "Hey, you. I'm trying to get to you. I'm not trying to get to anybody else right now. What is important is the relationship between you and me. What's important is the relationship that you have with my Son who is also me because there is three of us in the same thing."

Stacey then began to equate his suffering at that time with the suffering of Christ and recalled that Jesus Christ was a human, and that Jesus Christ farted and

probably picked his nose when He was little. That is how Stacey came to know God and Christ. Stacey said that he most identifies with the scripture passage, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” He explains the verse very well: “not I will or that everything I do is of Christ or that it is going to work. It just means that that possibility is there. You got to make sure what God wants for you, so I started the long haul back and stopped drinking for about a year. I drink occasionally now.”

Later that semester, Stacey was baptized at North Oxford Baptist. His baptism involved full immersion in a baptismal pool in front of the entire congregation including his friends and fraternity brothers. Actually Stacey was running late for his baptism because he had forgotten a change of clothes and almost slipped and fell while rushing to his position before the entire church. He and Pastor Vail chuckled quietly throughout his baptism.

After Stacey’s baptism his behavior changed gradually. His faith was strong but he struggled and still does to a lesser extent, with his prayer life, and the primacy of God. In his discussion of God and Christianity, Stacey also explained how existentialism and Christianity could co-exist. Kierkegaard found that the only solution to constant anxiety is the leap of faith to Christianity. According to Stacey the eternal sadness of existence can be seen in the eyes of the students of campus and shoppers in malls. Stacey considers this malaise to be the weight of original sin on the soul. In this and other ways Stacey has melded his philosophy major and his new religious affiliation. Stacey hopes to continue to speak about his experiences and will attempt to educate others on the benefits of a life in Christ.

I, myself, have a less dramatic yet equally meaningful conversion story. My name is Elizabeth Crowley, I am 22 yrs old and I am about to graduate from the University of Mississippi. I am from Chester, Connecticut and my major is Cultural Anthropology. My parents brought both my brother and myself to church every Sunday at the United Church of Chester. This church is part of the United Churches of Christ, a unit of non-denominational Protestant churches that are more prominent in the North. The most similar local denomination to my church is the Presbyterian Church. Both my parents have served as church stewards and have also been very involved in church outreach programs and fundraisers. I sang in the junior choir for ten years until my confirmation as an adult member of the church. My family has always been more dutiful than faithful. My father's Christian walk is very strong; however, I only ever had a mental understanding of the church. That is to say I understood and believed all of the statements of Christianity; however, I did not gain a spiritual understanding of Christianity until college.

Because I had a very happy and successful childhood, I think that I felt that a personal relationship with God was unnecessary for me. When I moved 2000 miles away from family and friends to begin college, I was totally lost. I made the all the terrible freshmen mistakes. I drank too much, I stayed out too late, I went out with the wrong kind of guys. I was very lonely at college. My roommate did not want to hang out with me and I had not been asked to join any sorority. Guys were the only other students I could find who were interested in hanging out with me. Of course, I thought I was making friends, having come from a single-sex private high school, I didn't realize that every one else thought I was doing much

more than I was. Regardless, after about four failed relationships I met a guy who really respected and loved me. We dated for about six months before we started going to Student Mobilization meetings. He had been invited to go by a female friend with whom he studied and I was jealous and so I decided to go with him. I had been searching my heart and head for a way to get back in touch with my Christianity and I had found it at Student Mobilization.

About a week after I attended Student Mobilization the female leaders of the organization came to visit me in my room. Liz and I began meeting once a week just to talk and hang out. For some reason though, every so often when we were talking I would start to cry. I did not understand why I was crying at the time, and Liz and I even joked about it. Liz and I met for a full year; we would talk about God and Jesus and I'd ask her questions and get her to explain the things that I did not understand. I was reading my bible off and on and praying almost everyday. About three months before I finally rededicated my life to Christ I would cry every time that Liz and I met, I'd blame it on stress or frustration or something else. After May of 1998, when I finally prayed for God to change me on the balcony of Square Books and submitted to God's will I never again cried when meeting with Liz, except at her wedding.

I truly believe that my tears were caused by my internal struggle. My brain wanted to be logical and scientific and factual, while my heart wanted to grow spiritually and allow faith to rule my soul. Since that summer day in Square Books, I have felt so much better, happier with my situation. I have been in much worse situations in the last two years than during that sophomore year yet because I have

allowed Christ into my heart I have an exponentially larger amount of peace inside of me. I am still a sinner and I still commit most of the sins I did before; but now I know that even though I am completely unworthy God loves me anyway.



## 6. CRISIS

In the progression of conversion the first dynamic step is that of Crisis. Crisis entails any type of trauma or upset that under proper circumstances causes a shift in religious conviction. Crisis can also be viewed as an opportunity for new options. These traumatic situations can be caused by the desire for fulfillment, adjustment, or transcendence (Rambo 1993: 166).

Stacey astutely linked the internal factors of conversion to sadness, which is perceptible in the public arena today. The emotional or psychological state of the converts at the time of crisis is an incredibly important internal factor in the conversion process. Lifton as cited by Rambo states that a crisis in the information age, with increased personal mobility and instantaneous communication, fosters a psychological environment of self-doubt and nebulous self-awareness (Rambo 1993: 31). Stacey addressed this lonely inner void produced by modern society in our interview. He stated that:

It's an eternal sadness, and it is just there, and you see it all over. Walking around campus, you can see it in people's eyes. You can see it in shopping malls. It is huge in shopping malls. You can see it in the urban sprawl. You can see it in places where people are building and building and filling and filling, trying to cover up that eternal sadness rather than just recognizing you have it, and another name for it, I think, eternal sadness is original sin.

Rambo calls this sadness that Stacey perceives, the fragility of self (1993: 31). He explains crisis as the felt discrepancy between an imaginary ideal state of affairs

and the present circumstances in which victims of crisis saw themselves (Rambo 1993: 47). Crisis can be religious, social, personal, or cultural in origin; additionally, a crisis can be attributed to any combination of these stressors. The different types of crisis and the various catalysts for crisis are two areas that need exploration. The participants in this study experienced various types of conversions ranging from crisis in the context of an orthodox religion system to intensely personal crisis that led to a conversion. This dissatisfaction with life or lifestyle came in various forms for my participants.

Kelly's crisis moment occurred during a church revival. Within the system of her church Kelly had a traditional conversion experience. That is, Kelly's experience as a thirteen-year-old followed the expected method of conversion. Kelly had attended a revival the week before her moment of crisis, and that weekend she came to the front of the church and declared her intention to become baptized. Later, after a meeting with her youth leader, she was baptized in front of the entire congregation. This type of conversion follows the expected and pre-organized system of conversion and full immersion baptism in keeping with the traditions of the Southern Baptist Convention. In Kelly's interview she repeatedly mentions that as a child attending church she was reminded and made afraid of the punishment of Hell. She was frequently asked if she was sure she would go to heaven if she died. Kelly admits that she accepted Christ into her life in order to gain entrance to Heaven and the benefits of Christianity like peace of mind and eternal grace. However, Kelly has since reformed her worship to include a reciprocal relationship with Christ.

Gene, Timmy, and Liz all experienced crises that began as personal but were reorganized as religious after fortuitous encounters with evangelical Christianity. For Gene his drug habit and frequent drinking came into conflict with his enjoyment of church services. He conceded that he felt very uncomfortable with his situation.

I didn't want to do the drugs I was doing, but they always made me feel real good, and one Saturday I took a bottle of amphetamines, probably two or three hundred dollars worth, and poured them in my hand and said, 'Lord, if you are going to do something to me, do it now,' because the night before I had watched my girlfriend dance to a song called *Worlds Apart*, and it was a song about God taking the world apart and rebuilding it the way He wanted. It was a real special song, and I was realizing that I was falling in love with this girl, and when I saw her dance to this song, it was all just coming together, and it was all happy and yea, yea, yea, but I realized that I had some real bad stuff in my life that was just not good at all, and it wasn't about me, and it wasn't about drugs. It was about God, and so I poured them out in my hand, and I said, "Lord, if you are going to do it. Do it," and I threw it away in a Texaco trashcan across from where I worked.

Gene challenged God to change him and nothing happened, until the next night during church. That night Gene had a spiritual encounter with God, he felt compelled to approach the front of the church; when members of the congregation laid hands on him he felt a surge of energy, spoke in an unintelligible language, and passed out. His drug problem was transformed into a spiritual crisis through the aid of his Christian girlfriend's church.

Timmy's personal crisis occurred when he grew to recognize that he could not quit his drug habit on his own and that he did not like the person he had become. According to Timmy it was very fortunate that these realizations came to him while he was on a Christian retreat sponsored by his church. He was able to talk to a counselor about his dilemma and that night he accepted Christ into his life with prayer.

Liz, as well, had been feeling uncomfortable with her life previous to her intensification of faith. She and her boyfriend at the time were not getting along and she had also felt less interested in the typical college lifestyle. Then she went on a weekend retreat with one of her Christian friends, that weekend her life was totally changed and she rededicated herself to Christ. Liz, herself, was amazed at the changes. She had no desire to go back to any of her old ways. Liz considered it an actual miracle that God changed her life that weekend.

Stacey and I had a different type of conversion experience. We were both personally dissatisfied with our lives and decided to ask God for guidance and help without the physical aid of religious institutions. Although Stacey and I had both become aware of the details of evangelical Christianity before our conversion, neither of us used the traditional vehicles of conversion. Alone with God, we had our private conversions.

The major catalysts for conversion recognized in my study of college-age Christians were spiritual or mystical experiences, dissatisfaction with current life, a desire for transcendence, protean selfhood, and externally stimulated crises. Other catalysts recognized by scholars are near-death experiences, healings, pathology,

and apostasy (Rambo 1993: 48-55). Any various combinations of catalysts can precede a conversion experience.

A mystical experience can be as disturbing as when the Apostle Paul was confronted by the resurrected Jesus or as quiet as the whisper of God's voice during a prayer. Nevertheless, mystical or spiritual experiences can be surprising and upsetting. For Gene, his experience at the front of Trinity Heights Church of God was life-altering. He felt the Holy Spirit flow through him, he spoke in tongues, and he was physically struck down by the power of God.

When life itself becomes unfulfilling many people experience dissatisfaction with life that begs the question, "Is this all there is?" This type of thinking stimulates a search for fulfillment, which sometimes ends in a conversion to Christianity. For example, about 9 months before my conversion I had begun investigating Asian culture and reading the Tao Te Ching. Also for the six months leading up to my conversion I was actively debating the Bible and searching for the truth during my meetings with Liz.

Some people are drawn to religions because they desire a transcendental experience. Gene mentioned that the high he experienced at church that Sunday night was better than any drug he has even done. Stacey also said something to the same effect. Some Christians simply desire an experience that is beyond the material world and therefore explore religion as a vehicle of enlightenment.

For other converts the catalyst of crisis is the urgent need for an established center. Because of the protean nature of some people, they are in need of an "anchor." Religion can be that anchor for some; it can prevent the personal

malleability that is standard (Rambo 1993: 51). Religion can offer a refuge from constant change; therefore, some people find that religion provides stability to their lives. This catalyst is a very important factor in collegiate conversion. The disruption experienced by many college students during their first year at school causes the exact type of aimless discontent that necessitates a search for stability.

Externally stimulated crises like the death of a family member or the loss of friends can also become catalysts for crisis. For Timmy the death of his grandfather, the suicide of his friend, and the breakup of his relationship all contributed to his faith crisis. An externally stimulated crisis can even include a conversation about Christianity that causes you to think in a new light.

All these forms of catalysts can instigate a crisis. According to Rambo this crisis is followed by the search for a way to pacify the crisis. He refers to this portion of the conversion experience as the quest (Rambo 1993: 56). As stated by Rambo, "Under abnormal or crisis conditions this search becomes compelling; people actively look for resources that offer growth and development to 'fill the void,' solve the problem, or enrich the life." I do not agree that all converts experience a questing portion of their conversion; however I think some of the data I collected could convey the idea of a quest.

For example, I felt unfulfilled and began taking classes about Asian culture and reading my Bible hoping for inspiration. Gene went from church to church in his town hunting for a spiritual home. It could be argued that Timmy, Stacey, Gene, and myself all looked for help from alcohol and drugs for a period in our lives. Nevertheless, I doubt the universality of the quest experience in the

conversion process for this reason: people who did not feel that anything was missing from their lives but became Christians by direct spiritual inspiration jump from crisis to conversion immediately. There is no temporal location in which the convert could quest. After *context* is established and *crisis* occurs, set off by catalysts, the future convert makes a *commitment* to new faith.

## 7. COMMITMENT

Commitment is the turning point of conversion. If any one point in the process of conversion could be the central moment of conversion commitment is that point. At this juncture, converts declare their newfound faith. Commitment consists of at least three steps: decision-making, surrender, and ritual (Rambo 1993:124). Commitment can happen in a matter of moments or it could take years of vacillating. The surrender to God is one of the biggest struggles for Christians; often it is a life-long effort. After the decision to surrender is made, a ritual signifying a conversion is performed. Rituals of commitment in southern evangelical Christianity consist of baptism, testimony, and recommitment of faith.

The first part of commitment is marked by indecision. This step of commitment often involves a battle of wills within the self. As Deuteronomy 30:15-20 explains, the choice is eternal life, which require belief and obedience, or death, which requires no restraint at all. This choice is, of course, much more complicated than it sounds. Often possible converts feel restricted by the social acceptability of their decision. Some are influenced to join a group because of the interpersonal relationships they already have there. Kelly's friends were all Christians when she decided to become baptized. Additionally, Gene's girlfriend was a devout Christian at the time that he became baptized. Others are discouraged from joining a group because they are concerned about the reaction of their non-Christian friends and family. For example, I had trouble explaining to my parents that I had had such a change of heart about religious matters. My parents are



relatively unfamiliar with the Christian evangelical tradition and were concerned that the group I had joined at school was a cult, though I think they were joking. Nevertheless, this conversation with my parents weighed heavily on my mind during my time of decision. It took me two years to decide that Christianity was what I wanted for myself. Another issue to complicate this decision is weight of the costs and benefits of committing to a religion (Rambo 1993: 126). Giving up old habits is not easy. Ultimately, however, one must make a decision to convert one's life to Christ or else the process cannot continue; the next step in the commitment process is called surrender.

Surrender is the internal portion of commitment; it is marked by transition, struggle, and renewal (Rambo 1993: 312). Because surrender is the simultaneous death and rebirth of the self, it causes strife within the convert. At this point in conversion the convert must put away old habits and lifestyles for a new life within the context of God's will. The yielding of control implies an acceptance of the authority of God. Both Timmy and Stacey recognized that they could not stop the drinking and drugs on their own, which helped them let God help them. Reaching this moment is extremely difficult; for a convert this process must be initiated by God's will and not by the convert's own "controlling volition" (Rambo 1993: 132). Kelly thought she had surrendered her cares and troubles to God, but later she realized that she had not let God take care of her parents' situation after the divorce. The recognition that, as a human being, one is not able to control circumstances or problems can stimulate the willingness to surrender one's life to a higher power that *can* control these matters. Regardless of the circumstance of surrender, the effect of

surrender is impermanent and very often converts need reassurance, guidance, and assistance in order to remain dedicated to their path.

A process that helps converts maintain their surrendered and dedicated state is an instituted ritual that confirms their conversion. Baptisms are the most obvious way to express this commitment; however, professions of testimony and reaffirmations of faith through prayer are also used to strengthen conversion. In some southern Evangelical Christian churches baptism is required according to the bylaws, while in other southern churches it is just recommended. Nevertheless, Baptism is a very important part of Christian ritual. All the participants in my research had been baptized at one point in their lives. Kelly, Stacey, Gene, and Timmy were all baptized shortly after their experiences of religious crisis. Liz and I were previously baptized and so we utilized reaffirmations of faith by prayer to emphasize our new commitment.

Stacey best explained the southern Baptist tradition of full-immersion baptism to me. His baptism was at North Oxford Baptist Church during his junior year in college.

Baptism is a real spiritual thing. It's a real individual thing. It's something you pray about, and it's just, you know, when you stand up in the water and you're washed, and your sins are washed clean, and that happens the moment you accept Christ, but baptism is just a public, public admission that you are going to be a Christian now, and I went there, and it, the Baptist Church, you know -- full body. None of this top of the head, none of this halfway stuff. All the way and I really think that's the way it ought to be, I mean, you know -- go all the way -- a hundred percent or nothing.

Full-immersion baptism is usually done in a large baptismal pool in the sanctuary of the church. Participants wear white robes to symbolize their cleanliness before God, and the water symbolizes the cleansing capabilities of Christ.

A less structured ritual of commitment is the rededication of previously baptized individuals to God. This is the form of commitment that Liz and I experienced. Liz was baptized at age eight; while I was baptized as an infant, in accordance with my church's theology. The sinner's prayer is often used to help converts demonstrate their new commitment to Christ. The sinner's prayer can take many forms; however it always contains four parts: recognition of sinfulness, admission of belief, solicitation of forgiveness, and invitation to leadership. For example the prayer that Liz and I said sounded a lot like this:

Dear Lord, I know I have done wrong and broken Your laws. I believe you died for my wrongdoings. I ask You to forgive me of all my sins. I want to turn from them. Please come into my life as You said You would. I trust you as Savior and I want to follow you as Lord. Amen (Student Mobilization 2000)

Another aspect of ritual is the unification of a convert with his or her new peer group. In this sense conversion and specifically commitment processes emphasize group identification. This ritual is not only done to confirm the acceptance of Christ into the convert's life but also to unify the convert with his or her church and congregation. As Rambo puts it,

From an institution's point of view, commitment ritual is designed to create and sustain loyalty to the group. From the individual's point of view, commitment ritual provides public testimony of the

culmination or consummation of a process that may have been going on for a period of time (Rambo 1993: 128)

The struggle between old and new behaviors is the most difficult battle of conversion. Before an individual dedicates himself or herself to Christianity it is expected that he or she takes care of his or her problems alone. After entering the world of Christianity, the individual must learn to pray for guidance and help and allow God to fix the problem instead. Whether a convert is baptized or newly affirms their beliefs, the process is always significant and difficult. Through decision-making a convert has time for reflect upon the seriousness of the venture. Surrender, though the most difficult, is also the most important step in commitment. Finally an institutional commitment ritual legitimizes the new life of the convert.

## 8. CONSEQUENCES

Conversion has many layers and facets, which are not easily recognized at first, especially with regards to such seemingly immediate conversions like those of Stacey and Gene. However, on further investigation it is shown that these conversions are equally complex processes wherein an individual begins with feeling of inadequacy and strife and through doctrinal change finds peace and hope within the context of Christianity. The consequences of these conversions vary, especially in areas such as activity, external and internal results, and permanency.

Both scholars and theologians question the velocity of the consequences of conversion (Rambo 1993: 145). For some individuals the commitment process spurs immediate activity in the form of prayer meetings, bible studies, and evangelical work. For others the consequences of conversion are measured and tentative. Usually the readiness to commit to their new faith is proportionate to the celerity of their conversion experience. Gene, Stacey, and Liz had intense conversions that carried their momentum over into their Christian activity. They became dynamic members of churches and Christian organizations immediately after their conversions. Though our faith is equally strong, Kelly and I have been more cautious and nervous about our forays into Christian activity.

Evidence of conversion can be seen in the converts' behavior. These college Christians do not get drunk, they do not curse, etc. They read their bible everyday and go to church once a week or more. External indications of a conversion may seem superficial; however they are a telling symbol of the

convert's heart. Personally Kelly, Gene, Stacey, Timmy, Liz and myself have all had profound transformations. Generally a convert may report a sense of connection with God, they may feel that a gap had been bridged between them. Some converts also say that they receive a sense of overwhelming love from God and that it helps them love their neighbor as Jesus bids (Rambo 1993: 160). Meanwhile other converts feel relieved from the guilt and burden of sin. I have been able to reflect on my past and forgive myself for things that had weighed on me for years. I have always experienced strong feelings of guilt; however, reading the Bible and praying has helped me recognize that God loves me even though I am imperfect. Many other new Christians feel that they have gained a sense of purpose in their lives along with a sense of belonging within their Christian group (Rambo 1993: 161). Timmy has become a nicer, more loving person since his conversion, which has earned him more friends and closer relationships.

Many southern evangelical Christian young adults with whom I have spoken remarked that they had been spiritual in their early adolescence but had "fallen away" or "lost faith" later on. For example, Liz was baptized when she was eight years old; however, during the end of high school and the beginning of college Liz remembers following her friends' examples instead of doing what God would have wanted her to do. Eventually, some of the participants had experiences that helped them reevaluate and rededicate their lives. The timing for this faltering of faith almost always coincided with the transition to college. As Rambo explains, sometimes a conversion process is a parallel to an otherwise occurring developmental stage. Rambo states that, "Movement from one developmental stage

to another can be the occasion for conversion. Likewise, conversion can foster movement to a new stage of development” (Rambo 1993: 157). The transition to college is already recognized as a large step towards adulthood. At that time young people are expected to start using their own judgment on issues from class attendance to mate selection. While some (incredibly well-adjusted) college students are ready to make these decisions, for many this is alarming and worrisome.

College students inevitably look to each other for advice; sometimes this is good but more often than not they are all experiencing the same burden of responsibility. This route almost always results in more pizza and beer and less responsible actions. This faltering faith occurs when Christian college students find that without the presence of a disciplinarian they are lost. Some have even reported that they felt abandoned. At this crucial stage of development to adulthood, a prescribed way of living and believe is very alluring. Perhaps, religious crisis proceeds from the difficulty in making decisions and the hope for guidance. What better guide than an omniscient, omnipresent, sentient being? And so whether the trip is a full circle or a lifestyle makeover these confused college students have located a path that helps them cope with the stress of exams, deal with new responsibilities, and make difficult decisions. The consequence of a conversion experience during this developmental stage is that the college students have found an effective system of beliefs and morals that can aid them in leading successful lives.

## 9. CONCLUSION

At the termination of this project I feel reminiscent over all the new insight I have gained concerning conversion and Christianity. I have truly benefited from this work and I hope it can be enlightening for others as well. I have learned so much about conversion and more importantly I have answered my questions, How and why does conversion happen?

As I have demonstrated conversion is more than an event or a single experience; instead, it is a complex process of mental and spiritual adjustment. Conversion involves the entire history of an individual's experiences with religion and the context from which that individual became curious about religion. Also the converts' environmental and personal circumstances previous to their crises and conversions have substantial impact on the type of experience that occurs. In short, context is the framework within which a conversion occurs.

These conversion experiences are also embedded within the system of language and storytelling, which colors their interpretation. The narrative structure of these conversion stories parallels with the structure of stages of conversion. Although these experiences were true and did cause conversions, they were also filtered through the lenses of time and narrative. Nevertheless, a crisis stimulated a commitment which carried with it consequences.

Crises can reside within traditional religion, or they can be personal in nature. Other people or events can cause them as well. Crises force individuals to confront their limitations and cause individuals to recognize conflicts and upsetting



circumstances. Sometimes a feeling of discontent or malaise will stimulate a religious crisis. Experiences in life often cause crises. Disorientation in life sometimes triggers the search for new options. The crises can have many sources and they vary in intensity, duration, and scope.

The defining moment of conversion is the commitment portion. During the process of commitment individuals go through a period of decision-making where they must decide if they are willing to make the sacrifices required for conversion. The converts must then subjugate their will to the will of God by surrendering. This is an act that takes both humility and bravery. Giving God control of one's life is an act that must be remembered and repeated often; many people struggle with submission. To mark this submission a convert can say a prayer that admits his or her sinfulness and asks God to guide you. In a formal ritual a minister can baptize a convert in the Holy Spirit, thus cleansing away sin and giving the convert new life in Christ.

The consequence of committing oneself to Christ is everlasting life, according to Christians. However, the observable consequences are spiritual activity, better moral behavior, and inner peace. In my case the consequences of commitment were making new wonderful friends who cared about and loved me. I also learned a lot about love and forgiveness. I have much less stress in my life because I am able to let God share the burden with me.

Conversion is an important experience to the converts and therefore merits our respect as well. Regardless of one's own beliefs or experiences it must be said that everyone's stories deserves an open ear. These "stories" of conversion have

significance far greater than data, and so I thank Kelly, Gene, Timmy, Stacey, and Liz for their honesty and openness. My project would have never been possible without their help.

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