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## In Search of His Hand: Christian Classics and Devotions

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# In Search of His Hand

## *Christian Classics and Devotions*



Doug Brown, Editor

*In this regular feature column each issue's theme is approached via devotional classics and written prayers. Devotional classics are those reports or interpretations of Christian experience which have transcended their temporal and cultural origins.*

### EXPERIENCING "GOSPEL"

Hugh T. Kerr and John M. Mulder (eds.). **Conversions.** Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1983. 265pp.

"I've only told this to two other people." With that, a student in my "Devotional Classics on Prayer and Discipleship" class cautiously began to share with us what she described as her most valuable possession—her conversion story. As she led us into her experience with conversion, I was impressed as never before with how cherished the "pearl of great price" can be. I was humbled by the implied trust. I was embarrassed by the realization that I had too often been party to discussions of evangelism and conversion so casual or structured that sharing such precious stories seemed inappropriate.

**Conversions** invites the reader to be absorbed into the conversion stories of fifty well-known personalities—from Paul, Augustine, Pascal and Bunyan to Lewis, Merton, and Muggeridge—in the history of Christianity. Brief but informative introductions are followed by first-person narratives of conversion. The editors, limited by the availability of sources, admit their selections fall short of being fully representative. All but three of the selections come from the sixteenth century forward, leaving an un-

fortunate silence from early and medieval Christianity. Several expected selections (e.g., Kierkegaard, Eliot, Bonhoeffer) are absent. Non-western and/or "common" representatives are few.

Still, as I read this collection, I find myself pondering numerous and at times unsettling insights into "conversion":

1. *Conversion contains mystery.* Historical context, religious tradition, biological peculiarities, personal experiences all shed light on spiritual movement. Access to the Word—incarnate, written, embodied—creates the occasion for decision. But no combination of such factors fully accounts for conversion. What to us is "mystery" may well be to a diligent God "giving the increase." An evangelizing congregation must celebrate, beyond the convert's decision and the evangelist's "success," the accomplishment of a gracious God who is introducing one more person to being elect.

2. *Conversion is difficult to type.* The storytellers appeal to a plethora of analogies—an innocently straying sheep, a curious adolescent, a rebellious youth, a U-turn, a ladder, an oasis, a battle. They speak of a higher vision, a discovery of the "true philosophy," a liberation, an illumination, an intuition, a feeling, a victory. They relive joy, fear, dread, ecstasy, pain, surprise, peace, flight. An evangelizing congregation must be a community of faith in which the Word and Spirit of God freely nurture each of the richly diverse stories of conversion.

3. *Conversion is centering.* We worship and demonstrate devotion to who/what we perceive to be "really real." In conversion, we (re)turn to a different

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centering reality. A new way of being—aspirations, values, dispositions, urgencies, loyalties, habits—unfolds. An evangelizing congregation must penitently admit what it is not when measured by the character of “kingdom,” thereby guarding against the temptation to degenerate into an idolatrous alternative to the true and living God.

Do not read **Conversions** unless you are ready to be pulled in from the margins of spirituality. Conversion as believing facts, obeying commands, and awaiting blessings too often remains on the periphery of experiencing “gospel.” **Conversions** permits you the all-too-rare privilege of respectfully drawing near to what each spiritual harvester should pray for. Along the way, you can hardly avoid recovering your own conversion story. A more mature evangelizing follows.

Excerpts from two prayers in Michel Quoist’s collection (a devotional classic that will be introduced in a future issue) close this column as guidance for meditation on conversion:

#### **HELP ME TO SAY “YES”**

I am afraid of saying “Yes,” Lord. Where will you take me? I am afraid of drawing the longer straw, I am

afraid of signing my name to an unread agreement, I am afraid of the “yes” that entails other “yeses.”

I am afraid of meeting your eyes, for you can win me.

I am afraid of your demands, for you are a jealous God. I am hemmed in, yet I hide.

I am captured, yet I struggle, and I fight knowing that I am defeated. O Lord, I am afraid of your demands, but who can resist you? That your Kingdom may come and not mine, That your will may be done and not mine. Help me to say “Yes.”

#### **I SPOKE, LORD**

Forgive me, Lord, for having spoken so badly,

Forgive me for having spoken often to no purpose;

Forgive me for the days when I tarnished my lips with hollow words, false words, cowardly words, words through which you could not pass.

Uphold me when I must speak in a meeting, intervene in a discussion, talk with a brother.

Grant above all, Lord, that my words may be like the sowing of seeds,

And that those who hear them may look to a fine harvest.