



Lesson Five

Is
Christian
Experience
Valid?



In his book *The Healing of Persons* (pp. 42-43), the renowned Swiss physician and psychiatrist, Dr. Paul Tournier, relates the case of a male patient who had a host of personal problems. Among his difficulties were an alcoholic father, rebellion against the career mapped out for him, his wife's death after only a year of marriage, conflicts in his second marriage, and financial troubles.

During treatment by Dr. Tournier, this young man was "brought face to face with Jesus Christ." He opened his life and began to share his need at a very deep level. "This religious experience," says Dr. Tournier, "brought about a noticeable improvement in his physical condition." But this experience did not immediately resolve all his difficulties, for "a religious experience, however profound, does not at one blow solve the problems of a person's life." Only after years of uncertain development did this man, helped by his faith in Christ, establish his home and find true happiness. Dr. Tournier gave some practical advice based on this example:

Experience will not permit an oversimplified approach, as if some flight of the spirit were all that was necessary to ensure a moral life free of difficulties, and unblemished physical and nervous health. But experience does nevertheless show how closely a person's physical and psychological state depends on victories which are won only in the realm of the spirit.

Later in this same book (p. 240), Dr. Tournier points out that

. . . religious experiences are not just a matter of euphoria. Once the original enthusiasm has passed, they continue to bear fruit to the benefit of a person's nervous balance, in concrete results in his life. When these results include the confession of a serious fault, reconciliation, and the ending of moral indiscipline, it would be childish to

attribute their effects to a state of euphoria brought about by autosuggestion.

There are many people today who would try to explain personal religious experience as simply a crutch, a sign of weakness, or a form of escapism. But in fact the true Christian experience leads to the opposite—the facing of life *as it is*, but with a firm faith in and commitment to Jesus Christ. A personal religious experience with Jesus provides an added dimension to life, for God and a human being are brought into a meaningful relationship with each other. This encounter is not a one-time experience alone, but it initiates a continuing communion. With it a radical change for the better is begun and from it develops a progressive transformation through the power of the Spirit of God. Our problems and difficulties begin to diminish in importance and can be handled, because God is our helper, His Holy Spirit is strengthening us, and slowly but surely we are becoming in fact what we are in potential—*Sons of God*.

LESSON OUTLINE

- Experience Alone is Inadequate
- Four Levels of Belief
- Religious Conversion
- Outstanding Examples of Conversion
- Man of the Will
- A Challenge
- Implications of Encounter

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. What value do you place upon personal religious experience?
2. What relationship does a subjective experience have to an objective reality?
3. Do you think that it is possible to have different levels of belief or faith?
4. What is the underlying difference between “religious conversion” as understood by most religions and as understood by Christianity?
5. Can you give your own definition of conversion as it relates to religious experience?
6. What does the term “subconscious incubation” say to you about religious conversion?
7. Do you personally know someone whom you would consider to be a Christian in the sense we are discussing? If so, what one thing characterizes that person's life of faith for you?
8. Have you come to the place where you are seriously considering becoming a Christian yourself?

WORD STUDY

apostasy	—	Renunciation of a religious faith.
Christian	—	An experience associated with a definite and decisive adoption of Christianity.
objective	—	Emphasizing or expressing the nature of reality as it is apart from personal reflections or feelings.
Regeneration	—	An act of being formed again; spiritual renewal; a radical change for the better.
subjective	—	Characteristic of or belonging to reality as personally perceived; relating to experience or knowledge as conditioned by personal mental characteristics or states.

LESSON DEVELOPMENT

An important official was traveling the main road between two large cities. In his possession were letters granting him the power to search out Christians wherever they could be found and to bring them back to the authorities in Jerusalem. He was almost to his destination when suddenly, and without warning, he was surrounded by a bright light. The official fell to the ground and the company came to a halt. He heard a voice calling him by name: "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Stunned, Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting," was the reply. "But rise and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do."

His traveling companions stood speechless. They had heard the voice but seen no one. Unsteadily, Saul rose from the ground. Although his eyes were open, he could see nothing. He had to be led by the hand for the rest of the journey. Saul was shaken to the very roots of his personality by this experience. For three days he could not see and he neither ate nor drank. He spent his time in prayer until a reluctant messenger—one of the Christians he had set out to arrest—came with instructions supernaturally revealed to him by God (see Acts 9:1-25).

The blindness and fasting were temporary, but his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus resulted in a permanent and complete change in his life. The whole thrust of his life had been revolutionized within an extremely short period of time. Saul was later known as the apostle Paul.^a His contribution to Christianity is probably unsurpassed by any individual outside of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

This kind of spectacular religious experience is the exception rather than the rule, but that in no way negates its validity. Paul's consequent dedication to Christ and the sufferings he later endured for the cause of Christ attest to this. But why the change? Because he had a personal and dramatic encounter with the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Another important official was returning home after a visit to Jerusalem. He was a deeply religious man on a quest for truth.

He had hoped that at Jerusalem he would receive the answer to his questions.

But as he was being driven along, he was reading with furrowed brow a scroll of the Scriptures. How could he understand when the religious experts could not interpret their own Scriptures to him? Where was God? What was the meaning of the prophecies he was reading about a “Suffering Servant?” Were there no answers?

A lone passerby interrupted his thoughts. He was actually offering to help the official with his problems! As they conversed, it was evident that this man held the key to the passage that had been so puzzling. He knew Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The official listened carefully and eagerly as the stranger told him the facts about Jesus and related them to his personal situation. Here was the answer to those questions. Here was truth.

The official—we do not know his name, just that he was a minister in the Ethiopian government—had no visionary experience of Jesus Christ as did Paul. Yet he too had a real *encounter* with Jesus.

From intellectual understanding he passed to an act of the will: he was baptized at the nearest oasis as a demonstration of his complete trust in Jesus. When he left the stranger—the evangelist Philip—we are told that he was a transformed person, who returned home joyfully. His intellect was satisfied; he had found purpose and reason in life (see Acts 8:26–40).^b

The Ethiopian official's encounter with Jesus was not dramatic. Yet in its effect it was as supernatural and as radical as it was for Paul. It revolutionized his life. In this sense it was just as valid—no more and no less.

EXPERIENCE ALONE IS INADEQUATE

Are all religious experiences valid? Religious experience *per se* is not what I am advocating. One Christian writer says bluntly: “Experience alone is too flimsy a base on which to rest the Christian system. . . . Religious sensation by itself can only prove itself” (Pinnock, p. 69). If I asserted that God exists just on

the basis of my personal experience, my assertion would be objectively unfounded. All that could be claimed would be that I had had an experience of some kind. The focus would be on what I perceive to have *happened* to me, rather than on the objective reality of what God had *spoken* and *done*. Behind the subjective experience there *must be an objective reality* to support it.

Certainly Christians believe in the validity of subjective experiences. Christianity abounds with unique experiences, but we do not appeal to experience alone, or experience for its own sake. Valid religious experiences must be based on truth and must be supported by the Word of God. Christianity's uniqueness, as the Bible indicates, is the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Although the philosophy of pragmatism has many shortcomings, it does make one strong point: "Whatever passes as true must have direct tangency with life and experience" (Ramm, p. 208). *Direct tangency with life* indicates that it must touch on, relate to, and be connected with life and experience.

We are speaking now in very general terms. If I have had a religious experience, it may or may not have been a valid one. There are all kinds of experiences—nearly all religions can point to some. The argument from experience can be used to justify anything from the use of drugs, to participation in witchcraft, to the values of Zen. Christianity does not, as was stated before, appeal to experience for its own sake. Christianity has built into it a system of checks and balances which should serve to prevent going to extremes. Personal religious experiences (subjective in nature) must be verified, confirmed, supported, and checked by what is outlined in Scripture and approved by God.

What evidence is there to evaluate a religious experience?

Well, perhaps it is good to ask yourself two important questions. First, "What is the objective reality to which this subjective experience corresponds?" When you are able to answer this first question by "Jesus Christ as presented in Scripture," then the second one is "How many other people have

had the same or similar experience related to the same objective reality?" Now let us apply these two evidences to the experiences of Paul on the Damascus road and the Ethiopian official.

First, did Paul's experience correspond to some objective reality? Yes, it did. For him, the reality was Jesus Christ. Ever after, when he related the events of that day, he associated his experience with the resurrected Christ and the Lord's call to repentance and obedience.^c

As for the Ethiopian official, he saw no vision and heard no voice. Rather Philip told him "the good news of Jesus" (Acts 8:35). But when he had received this instruction, he asked to be baptized, affirming "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37). This is all we know of his encounter. Tradition has it that when he returned to Ethiopia, he shared the message of Jesus; the result was the founding of the Christian church in Ethiopia.

Second, have there been others who have had the same or a similar experience related to Jesus? Yes, there have been many others. Remember that the most important part of these encounters mentioned was the complete transformation of a person's life. Each transformed life is added evidence of the reality and power of Jesus Christ, and the pages of history are full of examples of people whose life orientation was changed after encountering Him. The physical phenomena which accompanied Paul's encounter were unique. They were also all *temporary*. The transformation of his life was *permanent*. A personal encounter with Jesus Christ may or may not be accompanied by such unique outward sensations. It may be more in keeping with the experience of the Ethiopian. But nonetheless it will always be a life changing experience. The evidence from testimonials is overwhelming and we shall consider several of these later.

FOUR LEVELS OF BELIEF

Before discussing the specifics of religious conversion and sharing further examples of such, I must first emphasize the kind

of conversion we are seeking to establish as true. Dr. Walter Houston Clark, an American professor of psychology, says that religious *faith*^d, is “one of the most subtle and important problems of religious development” (Clark, p. 219). It involves more than just sitting down and thinking about it, coming to some acceptable conclusion and thereon building your faith. Reason has its proper role, but it is not the whole of what we have been saying about Christianity.

On the surface it appears easy to discover if a person is religious. Just ask him. Researchers, scholars and pollsters have done this repeatedly and have learned that most people are “believers,” to some degree at least, in a God and in life after death. But if we look more closely into the matter of religious faith, “we find the situation more complicated” (Ibid., p. 220). Therefore, it is important to our study to consider what Dr. Clark calls the four levels of belief.^e

Level One: Faith as Mere Words

His first level, technically called “stimulus-response verbalism,” is belief that is bound up in the power and use of words. Many people's “faith” is on this verbal level. Religion is simply a vocabulary, a way of expressing altruistic concepts, or transcendental symbolism. Belief, or faith, or religious experience on this level, is not very vital to one's life and conduct. One can take it or leave it and it makes little difference either way.

Level Two: Faith as Understanding

The second level of belief which Clark calls “intellectual comprehension,” is a very popular level of operation. It is into this category that the various proofs (remember we called them “pointers” in lesson two) for the existence of God fall. Reason and logic are the chief tools. However, they are incomplete if relied upon exclusively. This kind of belief may well not have any “relation with life nor affect it in the slightest degree” (Ibid.).

Of course reason plays a part in the development of faith, but the will and the emotions must also be involved. Scripture

emphasizes that we can and must understand God and His way of working in the world. Many texts clearly state God's position on the matter. "And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure" (1 Kings 4:29). "For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Proverbs 2:6). There are literally dozens of such biblical encouragements that suggest the faculty of reason is important in our approach to God. The apostle Paul reiterates the importance of reason when he urges the Corinthians: "Do not be children in your thinking; be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature" (1 Corinthians 14:20).

Intellectual comprehension, when divorced from will and emotion, is weak in that it is unable to relate to a personal God and does not provide a life changing experience.

Level Three: Faith as Action

This level of belief called "behavioral demonstration" combines intellectual comprehension with action. Clark says, "A man's actions demonstrate his real beliefs much more clearly than do his words" (Clark, p. 233). A classic example of this kind of belief is given in the story Jesus told about the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Here was a man who not only believed intellectually in human dignity, but demonstrated that belief by his acts of mercy. This is getting very close to a true faith as far as Christianity is concerned. Practical, day-to-day living out of faith is a sure indication of valid Christian experience.

The main problem with this level, when related to Christian faith, is that it can be valid for any belief embodying a set of worthy moral or humanitarian standards, whether or not they are related to a personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. "Even when virtuous action breaks forth we are never quite sure that a positive religious conviction lies at the root of it" (Clark, p. 223).

Level Four: Faith as Integration

Level four—called "comprehensive integration"—is a combination of "Faith as Understanding" and "Faith as Action," integrated with personal faith and commitment to truth as

revealed in Jesus Christ. The three previous levels are partial. Taken alone, they are not satisfactory.

“A belief becomes totally wholesome and fully admirable only when verbalized conviction is well comprehended through critical and creative thought, the whole well integrated with behavior to form a Gestalt perfectly convincing even to a misanthropic observer. The true saint has a universal appeal (Ibid.).

A person with mature faith is one who acts upon what truth he understands and continues to seek answers to puzzling or nagging questions. He blends ideals with practice and develops a consistent pattern of what he should *believe* with that kind of person he should *be*. As Dr. Orlo Strunk put it: “Our theology must become our psychology” (Strunk, p. 140). This indicates a mature faith, a growing faith, a faith built upon fact. It is a faith that is centered in history and rooted in reality. It is realistic about life and at the same time expresses a total confidence in the ability and power of God to accomplish His purpose in the earth and in the lives of each individual who will give Him the chance. This is a faith with an *expanded concept of reality* that goes beyond what is visible and temporal to the invisible and eternal. It is my hope that you are ready to move to this level of faith, which we must now discuss in more detail as religious conversion.

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

The religious experiences talked of in this chapter are generally known as conversions. Some psychologists consider religious conversion to be simply transitional. A person who is searching finds a new body of ideas more to his liking than those he holds, so he accepts the new. It may be a sudden decision, or it may be gradual. In this general sense, conversion could just as easily be away from religion as toward it. Apostasy, or rejection of faith, may be as much conversion as is acceptance. Indeed the term may be applied in a non-religious context. For example, a person may switch to a left-wing political party from a right-wing political party. Or, someone may gradually change his attitude from dedication to anarchy and revolution to acceptance

of diplomacy and peaceful compromise. In each case some kind of conversion experience is involved.

Spiritual conversion is more complex. It is not simply transitional, although there is a transfer from one set of values to another. And while conversion is unique to each individual—for every human life is different—there are nevertheless recognizable stages in the process. The first two stages are hard to list separately because either of them can occur first. So let us say that the first and second stages involve a period of *unrest* and what some psychologists call *subconscious incubation*.

In the period of unrest there is a sense of unworthiness or incompleteness, a strange sense that something is missing from one's life. There may be a feeling of meaninglessness, or depression, or despair. During the period of subconscious incubation there are subtle factors at work in the psyche which slowly but surely lead a person to the realization that a dynamic religious faith is the only answer to life's great questions. In both cases, an acceptance of Jesus Christ is seen as the logical, proper, and necessary step that must be taken.

It may be that this is where you are now. You are reading this course in an attempt to find some answers. You are headed in the right direction, certainly not because I wrote it, but because the items discussed here will help you if you give God a chance in your life.

The third stage is the period of crisis or decision. However long or short the time of unrest and incubation may be, “the event of conversion comes to focus in a crisis of ultimate concern” (Johnson, p. 117). The *event* of conversion is the moment when the answer to the questions and the relief from the unrest are personally accepted. It is looking back and realizing that God was there all the time. It is facing the future and acknowledging that God is there as well. It is finally admitting that God is, in fact, present in the present. We stop running. We quit our game of intellectual hide and seek. We stop rationalizing our way out of a moral and spiritual corner. We are willing to be found, to be loved, to be changed by God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul Tournier relates the story of a Jewish friend of his with whom he had conversations over a period of several months. This friend was seeking spiritual reality. Long discussions between them were getting nowhere. One day the friend went to Dr. Tournier to say he had found Christ as the reality he was looking for. The man had met a Christian who told him that he was an “intellectual glutton.” This caused the man to examine himself very deeply. He realized that he needed simply to commit himself to Christ and that then everything would fall into place. Tournier summarized his friend's experience in these words:

Examining his conscience, he had suddenly seen that his inexhaustible religious discussions, however interesting they might be, were nothing but a kind of intemperance, and that they were blocking the road to his conversion (Tournier, p. 114).

The moment of realization and acceptance is different for everyone. With some people there is a physical phenomenon which accompanies it. John Wesley (1703-1791), the great English minister, described his conversion as “being strangely warmed.” With others there is a psychological manifestation. One person described it this way: it was “as if a strong current of life had suddenly been poured into me.” With most, there is a change in their feelings. They feel at peace; they feel loved; they are full of joy. These personal experiences are good, but they are valid only because they correspond to an objective reality. A fundamental transformation has taken place in each life. Scripture promises this change, although it does not promise any particular expressions accompanying the change. What does happen is *regeneration*: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Bible describes this in many other ways—new birth, adoption by God, justification by faith, reconciliation to God, gift of new life, liberation, etc.

All these terms imply that the event of conversion is both an end and a beginning. The subconscious incubation and unrest give way to the new birth (the event) which in turn leads to

growth and maturation. Hence *continuity* is the final stage of conversion, and it is lifelong. Some new Christians experience a rosy afterglow to their conversion: for a few days everything is wonderful. But remember Tournier's warning that a religious experience does not make all our problems go away instantaneously.

What good is this experience then? First, life for the Christian, instead of being a fragmented collection of joys and pains, fits together and begins to make sense. Second, the pains and problems can be shared with God, who has the power and wisdom to heal and resolve them or to help us deal with them. Third, in spite of the problems, there is a sense of inner peace, because God is there and because there is a reason for living. Fourth, loneliness is over, because Jesus is a friend who does not go away and because there are other Christians to relate to. Fifth, God's Word provides, not pat answers, but standards for a consistent and coherent life-style.^f Finally, the Christian perspective on time includes eternity so that, without escapism, there is relief from tension in the face of inexplicable set-backs and injustices.

By conversion I am not talking about a religion *of* experience, in which what happens to you or how you feel is the final authority. No, not at all. Religion of experience alone avoids the strain of theology, the challenge of intellectual pursuit, and becomes simply a passing fashion which people accept if it happens to suit their interest. R. A. Knox in *Enthusiasm* has eloquently demonstrated the pitfalls in a faith that relies too heavily on experience alone. But do not refuse a faith simply because it includes experience.

OUTSTANDING EXAMPLES OF CONVERSION ^G

An evidence for the validity of Christian conversion is that people of all nationalities, cultures, and times have shared in the same experience. Another evidence is that it works! Thousands of cases could be cited, and documentation given, to illustrate and prove the impact of Christian conversion. The examples selected here represent different cultures, different backgrounds, different starting points, and different kinds of personality. The

mechanics of their conversion experience differ, too, but the effects are the same: a new world-view and a new life-style, centered in Jesus Christ.

Professor O. Hallesby, Norway

The late Dr. Hallesby wrote a book entitled *Why I Am a Christian*. This book is a simple direct presentation in which he relates his spiritual saga from skepticism and doubt to a firm Christian faith. Because of his education, he shared the doubts of many educated people. He was convinced that if a person did not know Christian life from his own experience, intellectual difficulties would quickly make him skeptical.

For him doubters were of two kinds. One kind was “those who live in doubt because their skepticism shields them from the accusations of conscience.” This kind of doubt, he believed, could never be overcome by logical arguments because it is based in emotion rather than reason. Only personal experience could lead such a doubter to faith. The second kind of doubter, according to him, was one who was in painful distress because of his doubt and was really tired of uncertainty. He felt that this was his position. He was intellectually honest about wanting to *know for sure*. His sympathy with the honest doubter is evident when he says,

I, too, have passed through the various states of doubt. I have felt its anguish. But I also know a way out of doubt and into faith, a way which is open to all doubters, and this way does not do violence to any of our human faculties, not even to our reasoning powers.

Dr. Hallesby found the way out of doubt because he was completely honest about wanting to know the truth. Scripture teaches that any one who honestly wants to know will get to know. “If any man's will is to do his (God's) will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority” (John 7:17). Here, Jesus promises to give personal assurance on the basis of experience. The only condition is to be willing to do the will of God.

These words of Jesus tell us something very important about doubt. It is not due to great educational or intellectual achievements.

Nor is it due, at the other extreme, to a modesty which feels so much knowledge is lacking that truth cannot be known. "The cause of your doubt is something entirely different," says Hallesby. "You lack certain experiences. That is why you find yourself in doubt and uncertainty."

This man's conversion was not spectacular in the same way as the apostle Paul's but it was just as definite and complete. Like the Ethiopian official, he sincerely desired to know truth, and this knowledge was given to him in an unspectacular but definite way. His life demonstrated the change that had come about in him. As a result of the conversion he experienced, the meaning in life he found, and the answers to questions he discovered, he was able to help others who were honestly seeking truth.

Sadhu Sundar Shigh, India

Sadhu Sundar Singh is a recent example of a life transformed by a vision of Jesus. An Indian youth who once bitterly persecuted Christians, Sundar Singh became one of the most remarkable ministers of the gospel of the twentieth century.

As a Sikh of a prominent family, Sudar was deeply religious, but his religion could not satisfy his search for reality. His early life was beset with disappointments. Illness and the death of his mother contributed to his deep despair. He decided to stay in his room three days and three nights waiting for a revelation of truth. If none came by a certain hour, he decided he would throw himself on the tracks in front of a fast-moving train.

Three days and two nights passed without any revelation of truth. Only a few hours remained before his appointment with death. In agony of soul he cried, "O God, reveal Thyself before I die."

That night he fell asleep, and while sleeping he had a dream in which Jesus Christ appeared and spoke to him in Hindustani: "You are praying to know the right way; why do you not take it?"

I am the way.” That night Sundar became a Christian. He said: “I can serve no one else but Jesus!”

From the moment of his encounter with Jesus, he was different. His despair was gone. He had a purpose in life. Nothing could turn him away from his desire to serve Christ—not pleading, not the offer of wealth, not even persecution. His family disowned him and tried to poison him, but he recovered and fled. He was baptized and spent the rest of his life serving Christ and helping people. As a celibate and mystic, he was considered eccentric and strange by other Christians. But the fact is he was a changed man, and through persecutions of the worst sort, he witnessed to the power of Jesus Christ. It is not known when he died; he was last seen and heard from in 1929 when he attempted to enter Tibet in order to bring the good news of Jesus to that forbidden land. The Indian government announced in 1933 that he was presumed dead. His life of rugged discipleship remains as an example of the difference Christ makes in a personal life.

Ni To-Sheng, China

Ni To-Sheng was born in China in 1903 to a slave woman who had been forced to marry. As a result, he had a very difficult childhood. At the age of eighteen, he was faced with the person of Jesus Christ. Ni To-Sheng accepted Him in a straightforward, unspectacular way. By this act of the will, he committed himself to follow Christ in total, lifelong obedience. His understanding of commitment is seen in his life of giving and self-sacrifice.

Despite the agonies of persecution and the hardships of imprisonment for his faith, he ministered to his people. When he could no longer preach and teach, he turned to writing. The non-Asian Christian community today knows Ni To-Sheng best as Watchman Nee, the author of many books on the spiritual life, the church, personal devotions and other spiritual themes.

He died in prison in 1972 at the age of sixty-nine. Very little is known about his twenty years in prison except that he endured many hardships. A favorite expression of his was: “I want nothing for myself,

I want everything for the Lord.” Certainly the life of this oriental martyr is an inspiration to Christians; it demonstrates what it means to be a totally committed Christian. Remember that the conversion of Watchman Nee seemed to have no unusual outward signs to confirm it, yet the transformed life and the high ideals put into practice against all odds are evidence of a genuine encounter with Jesus Christ.

C. S. Lewis, England

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) is one of the most read Christian authors of this century. He was born and raised in Great Britain. He was a graduate of Oxford University and later became a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, and Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge.

Professor Lewis became a Christian only after he had subjected the Christian faith to the most difficult intellectual tests. It was at the age of forty that he became convinced of the existence of God.

Surprised by Joy (1955), his “spiritual autobiography,” was written “partly in answer to requests that I would tell how I passed from Atheism to Christianity.” First Lewis became a theist. Then there followed a period of searching, when he investigated various religions—temple prostitution, monstrosities, cruelty. He came to the point where he felt that no religion had such a historical claim as Christianity. Yet Lewis still thought of God as impersonal. Nor had he come to see the necessity and purpose of Jesus Christ. He began to attend church, although the idea was unattractive to him. Soon he began to see that if God existed at all, then He had to be a God with the ability to love, to feel, and to reach man. It was then that the full message of Christianity, including the incarnation of Christ, made sense. He expressed it this way: “Here and here only in all time the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man. This is not ‘a religion,’ nor ‘a philosophy.’ It is the summing up and actuality of them all.”

He describes his encounter with Christ in very personal terms. It was not a highly emotional experience, nor was it

something he thought a great deal about before it happened. He says, in fact, that what “I found was something I had not wanted.” Yet somehow “the final step was taken” and C. S. Lewis became a Christian.

In later life he continued to excel in the field of literary criticism, and he authored many Christian “classics,” in addition to *Surprised by Joy*. His *Mere Christianity*, one of several books on aspects of Christian thought, was recommended in lesson three; his *Screwtape Letters* and the Space trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*) are world-famous; even his series for children, the modern mythology of *Narnia*, makes fascinating reading for adults. Lewis, together with his friends like J. R. R. Tolkien and Dorothy L.

Sayers, is a demonstration that the scholar-artist can be a Christian, and that this enhances—not destroys—his intellect and creative talent.

Lewis personifies the honest search for truth. He was convinced that in a God-directed universe, the honest seeker would find truth.

What I like about experience is that it is such an honest thing. You may take any number of wrong turnings; but keep your eyes open and you will not be allowed to go very far before the warning signs appear. You may have deceived yourself, but experience is not trying to deceive you. The universe rings true wherever you fairly test it.

The foregoing examples of Christian conversion experiences show that for some the encounter with Jesus Christ was sudden and emotionally overwhelming, while for others it was a gradual and gentle recognition. Some find it easy to believe when presented with the claims of Jesus Christ. A few have been given supernatural evidence to aid in the decision, while others must approach faith by intellectual reasoning. The important thing is that these men, representative of so many others, all encountered Jesus Christ and found Him to satisfy their expectations.

THE MAN OF THE WILL

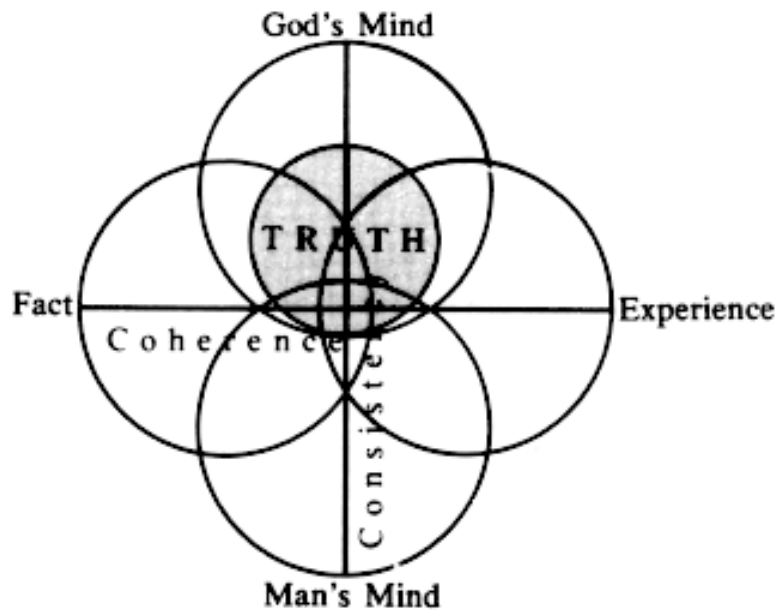
C.S. Lewis was convinced—and I am too—that the search for truth (what Lewis calls “experience”) leads ultimately to an encounter with Jesus Christ. The problem so often is intellectual dishonesty along the way. But I believe that your arrival at this point in this course indicates you are sincerely willing to accept truth wherever you find it. Moreover, I believe that you are sincerely ready to act upon that truth.

In the Introduction, I mentioned three kinds of persons: the man of intellect, the man of emotion, and the man of the will. Each of us has these characteristics within us. The fault of the first two types is that they neglect or refuse to admit the importance of the others. The intellectual man will not accept the validity of feelings and refuses to accept the validity of religious experience where non-rational elements may be involved. The emotional man is unwilling to discipline himself to think things through, and, while intolerant of the rational approach, falls short in his own religious experience by failing to find the objective reality to which it corresponds.

What then is the man of will, whom I identified with the informed and committed Christian? He is the man who integrates the intellectual and emotional aspects, and moves beyond them by conscious choice. If he starts primarily at an emotional level (like Paul), he is ready to submit his experience to the rigors of intellectual inquiry. As Pinnock says, “The heart cannot delight in what the mind rejects as false” (quoted in McDowell, p. 3). If he begins from an intellectual level (like the Ethiopian official), he is ready to move beyond mere verbal assent, which is the lowest level of belief as mere intellectual comprehension. The man of the will *acts* upon what truth he understands.

The first disciples of Jesus Christ had “favor with all the people” (Acts 2:47). They had moved to coherent action. What they knew about Jesus and what they had felt in the earth-shaking experience of Pentecost (read Acts 2:1-42 for the full account) had been integrated by their will and turned outward into action that others could understand and appreciate. If it is genuine, the encounter experience of conversion will be followed by a life-style consistent with and flowing out of truth. And Truth is the One who is encountered. The diagram below

illustrates Christian conversion and the new life of coherent action which Christians call discipleship.



The Christian is neither a naive enthusiast relying on emotional experiences, nor an intellectual pygmy giving verbal assent to an irrelevant code. The Christian is a person who has met Jesus Christ and, having understood and accepted His claims, has entered into life with a new and different perspective. He does not claim to have all the answers, nor is he instantaneously perfect. But he continues to seek answers to his unresolved questions, and with God's help he works on those personality traits which are displeasing to Him. The Christian endeavors to blend ideals with practice, and sets about developing a consistent pattern of behavior. For the Christian, the truth about believing, being, and doing are all found in that same objective reality—Jesus Christ the Lord. The coherent and consistent life is found in being like Him!

A CHALLENGE

In lesson one I challenged you to complete the study of this material. You have done that. In lessons two and three I challenged you to pray and ask God for help in your search for truth and that Christ might be revealed to you. Lesson four contained a challenge to read the New Testament.

Now comes the final but most important challenge. It involves more than any of the others. They were challenges to your time, your pride, or your past prejudices. *Now I challenge you to accept Jesus Christ, to identify with Him, to encounter His life changing power, and to decide to take on a new walk and a new direction in life.*

But it is essential to understand the *implications of* such an encounter of decision before entering into it. Frank Colquhoun, an English-Anglican minister, has written a helpful book entitled *Total Christianity*, in which he says that being a Christian involves four things. First is the experience of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or *commitment*, as he calls it. We have dealt with this aspect of Christianity rather extensively in this lesson. Second is *community* or participation. This is seen as the reaching out to other Christians and other people in general. It is here that a local gathering of Christians plays an important role. The Church, in spite of imperfections, *is* the Body of Christ. Therefore, we should be involved there. Third is *creed* or a belief system. There must be sound rational and spiritual bases for all our attitudes and actions. Dogma, theology or specific beliefs must provide an inner foundation to our experience and commitment. Fourth is *conduct* or ethics. As Christians we serve a new Master. We have a moral and spiritual responsibility to Him. The sincere Christian has a particular life-style, a pattern of morality, a way of behaving that does not contradict his statement of faith.

Thus to be a “total” Christian requires commitment (personal religious experience), community (integration into the church), creed (a belief system based on Scripture and the use of our minds), and conduct (an ethic for life). Such a faith is not intended to be easy, but it is by far the best way. It is personal, yet social. It is experiential, yet rational. It touches every aspect of our being.

How do you go about accepting Jesus Christ? How can you have an encounter with Him? How can you have an experience of conversion and begin a coherent and consistent life? This is not a recipe, but here is a list of suggestions, which you could take as *steps toward God*. The Bible assures you that He is more than ready to meet you, if you move in His direction: “You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart I will be found by you, says the lord” (Jeremiah 29:13-14).

Steps Toward God

1. Recognize that you do not have the ability within yourself to bring inner harmony and peace. Admit that you have broken God's law, that you are guilty, and that you need and want help (Romans 3:23).
2. Recognize that Jesus is “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6), and hence the only One who can help you and bring peace. Also, realize that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are the only means by which you receive forgiveness and regeneration (Acts 4:12).
3. Ask Jesus to come to you, to cleanse you, to forgive you, to change you, to refresh you and to give you new life (2 Corinthians 5:17).
4. By an act of your will, give your whole life to Jesus Christ, so that He can help you make it a more beautiful thing than you ever dreamed possible. Determine to follow Jesus, which implies your willingness to obey Him in everything, and put His way first.
5. Carry out that promise by praying, reading the Bible and finding a place of worship. Following your commitment, obey the Bible by seeking to be baptized and participating with other committed Christians in the Lord's Supper.
6. Finally, go on developing as a new person in Jesus Christ, following the instructions in 2 Peter 1:5-8 for an effective Christian life.

IMPLICATIONS OF ENCOUNTER

If you follow these steps slowly, sincerely, and deliberately, the Holy Spirit of God will make them real and important in your personal experience.

If you have made the choice to accept Jesus Christ into your life, I encourage you to continue in your new faith. Some time ago I was conducting a Bible study for university students. In the middle of the lecture a girl raised her hand and asked me a personal question. Just a few weeks before she had decided to become a committed Christian rather than a mere “culture Christian.” Now she was facing certain questions and problems as a result of her new commitment. Her question to me was: “Do you ever have any doubts or questions with regard to the Bible, Jesus or Christianity?”

Without hesitation I replied: “Yes, of course. But as a Christian I approach the question from the standpoint of someone on the *inside* rather than someone on the *outside*. And I have great confidence in the Holy Spirit to keep His word when Jesus said that He (the Holy Spirit) would lead us into all truth. I do not wait to have faith until every question I have is resolved. For the Christian, faith comes first and understanding always follows.”

I had one professor in seminary who said: “A question properly asked is a problem half solved.” In a very real sense this is true. We need to ask the right questions. This course has attempted to pose the questions—at least some of them—and to point you in the right direction.

From my own experience I can tell you there is joy in being a Christian. It is not a mere week-end journey; it is a lifelong pilgrimage. It is not like reading fiction; it is experiencing fact. It is not just existence in a dull world; it is the exhilaration of mountain climbing. It is not retreating from the world into fantasy; it is looking life square in the face. It is not sitting in the stadium; it is moving into the arena and becoming involved yourself. And this life is for you who accept this invitation to encounter.

REMINDER: Please do not forget to complete the Student Interactions according to the instructions given in the Course Information. Remember that Interaction A is a guide review of the material covered in the course. You should prepare for it as you would for an examination, paying particular attention to the material covered in the Self-Check Reviews. When you have completed Interaction A, please mail it as instructed.

Since you have completed the course, your comments in Interaction B will be particularly valuable. Please be frank and thorough in the way you fill in this section. It will help us be aware of what is needed, and we may be able to help you with supplementary material.

You may recall that Interaction C is an invitation to record your position on an encounter with Jesus Christ or to ask for personal contact. Without wishing to pressure you, we say that we welcome your response in Interaction C.

^aThe Bible places a great deal of importance on the name given to an individual. "In Scripture names were generally descriptive of a person, of his position, of some circumstance affecting him, hope entertained concerning him, etc., so that 'the name' often came to stand for the person" (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, "Name"). When a person had a radical change in circumstances or an encounter with God, it was not unusual for him to take or to receive a new name. There are numerous instances of this in Scripture. You will recall from lesson three that Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter.

Modern psychologists agree that the name becomes a symbol of the self, and a well-liked name inspires confidence and self-esteem, while an unpopular, embarrassing, or strange name increases the psychological problems relating to self-worth.

^bNote that this account is immediately before that of the apostle Paul. Thus, side by side in Acts, you have two very clear but very different conversion experiences.

^cPaul's conversion experience has already been cited. However, he later recounted his experience as a part of his defense after being arrested as a Christian. See Acts 22:1-21 and 26:1-23 and compare them with 9:1-25 and you will have a complete picture of Paul's encounter with Jesus and the effect it had upon his life.

^dClark uses “faith” in much the same way as I have been talking about “religious experiences” with regard to an encounter with Jesus Christ. Very shortly now, I will use the term “conversion,” to describe the religious experience of faith in Jesus Christ, which constitutes becoming a Christian.

^eThese four levels are discussed in Clark’s book pages 220-224. While I have used his basic outline, which concerns primarily the psychological aspects of belief, I have supplemented it with my own thoughts.

^fRemember from lesson one the criteria for testing truth? Perhaps it would be good to turn back to those pages dealing with *coherent consistency*.

^gEach of the following testimonials came from an autobiographical (Hallesby, Lewis) or biographical (Sadhu Sundar Singh, Ni To-Sheng) account. In each case only *one* source was used, which is listed in the “Reference Cited” section at the end of the lesson, and page citations are not given.

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2. Colquhoun, Frank. *Total Christianity*. Chicago, Illinois, USA: Moody Press, 1965.
3. Davey, Cyril J. *Sadhu Sundar Singh*. Chicago, Illinois, USA: Moody Press, 1963.
4. Hallesby, O. *Why I Am a Christian*. London, England: InterVarsity Press, 1968.
5. Johnson, Paul E. *Psychology of Religion*. New York, New York, USA: Abingdon Press, 1959.
6. Kinnear, Angus I. *Against the Tide*. Eastbourne, England: Victory Press, 1973.
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8. Lewis, C. S. *Surprised by Joy*. London, England: Collins Fontana Books, 1973.
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12. Strunk, Orlo. *The Choice Called Atheism*. Nashville, Tennessee, USA: Abingdon Press, 1968.
13. Tournier, Paul. *The Healing of Persons*. New York, New York, USA: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965.

FURTHER STUDY SUGGESTIONS

Allport, Gordon W. *The Individual and His Religion*. New York, New York, USA: The Macmillan Company, 1960 (paperback edition).

The whole book is profitable as a psychological interpretation of religion. Chapters five and six are especially good on the nature of doubt and faith.

Baillie, John. *Invitation to Pilgrimage*. London, England: Penguin Books, 1960.

The book was written for the “Christian agnostic,” i.e., the person who may be Christian in name only but not in faith or experience. The author speaks clearly but sympathetically to such a person.

Colquhoun, Frank. *Total Christianity*. Chicago, Illinois, USA: Moody Press, 1965.

A minister in the Church of England writes forcefully on what it means to be a Christian. This book is highly recommended for new Christians and those who want to know the demands of Christian living.

Davey, Cyril J. *Sadhu Sundar Singh*. Chicago, Illinois, USA: Moody Press, 1963.

The biography of the great Indian Christian mystic whose life was summarized in this lesson.

Edman, V. Raymond, editor. *Crisis Experiences*. Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA: Dimension Books, Bethany Fellowship, Inc., no date.

This 96 page book recounts experiences in the lives of nine outstanding Christians, mostly American or British. The book is a reprint of a series of magazine articles.

Hallesby, O. *Why I Am a Christian*. London, England: InterVarsity Press, 1968.

In this excellent book, Professor Hallesby answers objections to and doubts about Christianity, using illustrations from his own life.

Kinnear, Angus I. *Against the Tide*. Eastbourne, England: Victory Press, 1973.

This is the moving story of Watchman Nee. It is an excellent biography, carefully researched and well written.

Kitwood, T. M. *What Is Human?* London, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970.

The author discusses three views of man: humanist, existentialist, Christian. He gives a brief appraisal of the first two philosophies and writes to any who have "not found the way to a full Christian belief."

Lewis, C. S. *Surprised by Joy*. London, England: Collins Fontana Books, 1973.

This is the autobiography of one of the most creative and provocative Christian writers of this century. It is an attempt to trace his search for spiritual meaning and to show how he found it in Jesus Christ. Any of Lewis' books are worth reading.

Little, Paul E. *Know Why You Believe*. Downers Grove, Illinois, USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1971.

An excellent book. Chapter 12 relates especially to the topics discussed. It is from this chapter that the title was taken, "Is Christian Experience Valid?"

PERSONAL STUDY

1 Read the following Scripture texts—Romans 3:21-23, 6:23, 10:8-13; John 1:12; John 1:9. Write a brief sentence, based on these verses, about each of the following words which are important in a consideration of Christian conversion.

Sin

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Confession

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Belief

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Sons of God.....

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2 Reflect upon the idea of *subconscious incubation* as discussed in this lesson. Can you list some of the things that have happened in your life which helped influence you to consider Christianity and this course?

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3 Have you known persons who have been an example of Christianity in the way I have described? If so, list the main characteristics of their life of faith for you.

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4 If you want to become a Christian now, it is possible. Simply ask Jesus Christ to forgive you of all wrongdoing and to make you acceptable in His sight. Pray as though you were talking to a friend, for you will be. Write in the space below why you want to accept Christ.

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5 If you want help in starting a prayer of repentance and confession use the following one and then add your own words at the end.

“Lord Jesus, I confess my need of You and desire to give You my life and my future. Forgive all my wrong deeds and shortcomings, and make my life clean. Make me a child of God and help me every day to live for Your glory and honor. I invite you to become the Lord of my life and the center of my existence. Send the Holy Spirit to guide, strengthen, and empower me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.”

Now write the impressions you had when you prayed and what effect you feel these will have on your life.

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PERSONAL STUDY RESPONSES GUIDELINES

- 1 Sin — *Everyone* has sinned; the result of sin is *death*; sin can be *forgiven*.

Confession — If we confess (acknowledge and be sorry for) our sins, Jesus will forgive us. If we confess (acknowledge and proclaim, a second meaning of the word) Jesus Christ, we shall be saved from the effects of sin.

Belief — Belief is a matter of the heart (the will), results in our standing before God with no shame or guilt, makes us all equal before God, and is the means by which we receive the power to become more like God (His children).

Sons of God — Becoming Sons (children) of God is accomplished by our accepting Jesus as Lord and by believing He is who He said He was. But it is also a process by which His power transforms us into His image so that we bear a “family resemblance.”
- 2 Your answer; but you might include events which have clearly shown you your personal needs (for friendship, direction in life, forgiveness, etc.) and contacts with informed and committed Christians.
- 3 Your answer; perhaps these Christians have shown qualities such as concern, consistency, and commitment.
- 4 Your answer; perhaps you appreciate now your need of forgiveness and Christ’s ability alone to meet this need. Perhaps you are tired of a meaningless existence, and desire the new life and purpose Jesus gives. Perhaps you realize that God has been slowly revealing Himself to you, because you have been seeking truth.
- 5 Your answer.

SELF-CHECK REVIEW QUESTIONS

1 After studying the conversion experiences of the Ethiopian official and Saul (Acts 8 and 9), please match the events with the person and put them in chronological order by marking **x-1**, **y-1**, **y-2**, etc.

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| a was healed and baptized | x) Ethiopian |
| b had encounter with Jesus Christ in a vision | y) Saul |
| c was baptized as evidence of faith | |
| d persecuted Christians to please God | |
| e accepted explanations from a Christian | |
| f saw a light and heard a voice | |
| g had encounter with Jesus Christ in Scripture | |
| h declared faith in Jesus as Son of God | |
| i offered obedience to Jesus | |
| j studied the Scriptures looking for truth | |

Thought provoker: Can you detect the basic elements of search-encounter response seen here, in the beginning of friendships you have made? Perhaps you were lonely, met someone, were attracted, etc. Is there a pattern for you? Can you relate this to where you are in your relationship with Jesus Christ?

2 Christian conversion is a unique experience for each person. Which of the following elements would be special or extraordinary, and which would be common among those who have been converted? Write **N** for those which are *not usual* and **U** for those which are *usual*.

- **a** seeing a vision
- **b** subconscious incubation
- **c** period of unrest
- **d** search for spiritual reality
- **e** crying and shaking
- **f** realizing the need for Jesus Christ
- **g** feeling strong currents of life
- **h** being strangely warmed
- **i** accepting new life from Christ
- **j** being regenerated
- **k** being instantaneously delivered from drugs
- **l** deciding to follow Jesus for ever

Thought provoker: How does Christian conversion differ from any other radical personal experience you have had? How do you react to those differences?

3 The men used as examples of conversion show a number of qualities in their lives. Write in the blank provided the initials of the man or men who best show the following qualities; if none, write **X**; if all, write **ALL**.

- | | |
|---|---------------------------|
| a intellectual doubt | 0. Hallesby |
| b desperate need of God | Sadhu Sundar Singh |
| c intellectual arrogance | Ni To-Sheng |
| d commitment and service | C. S. Lewis |
| e sincere desire for truth | |
| f endurance under persecution | |
| g new purpose | |
| h high ideals put into practice | |
| i retreat from life | |
| j outstanding scholarship | |

Thought provoker: Consider the qualities which predominate in your life. Which negative traits do you need help in overcoming? Which positive traits do you need help in developing?

4 Please match the kind of faith with the appropriate technical term for the level of belief and its definition. Write the numbers for term and definition in the blanks provided.

a.....+.....faith as words

b+faith as understanding

c.....+.....faith as action

d+.....faith as integration

- 1) behavioral demonstration
- 2) comprehensive integration
- 3) intellectual comprehension
- 4) stimulus-response verbalism
- 5) verbalized and comprehended conviction carried out in consistent behavior
- 6) vocabulary dissociated from life-style
- 7) understanding shown in action
- 8) reasoned belief dissociated from action

Thought provoker: At various times and for various things, we all hold different levels of belief. Find something in your life for each level, then ask yourself if there is correlation between the amount of time you.

5 Please circle the letter of the descriptions which would be consistent with the concept of the man of will.

- a) seeks emotional experiences
- b) seeks encounter with truth
- c) subjects emotional experiences to intellectual scrutiny
- d) acts upon truth as felt and understood
- e) rejects experiences with any emotion
- f) desires to unite belief and experience in coherent action
- g) is intolerant of rational approach to religion
- h) accepts the validity of feelings
- i) claims to have all the answers
- j) chooses to identify with Jesus Christ

Thought provoker: In the human psyche the domains of intellect, emotion, and will are evidently difficult to separate. Consider, however, whether you yourself have been primarily a “man of intellect” or a “man of emotion” and whether you prepared to become a “man of will.”

SELF-CHECK REVIEW ANSWERS

- 1 a** y-5
b y-3
c x-5
d y-1
e x-2
f y-2
g x-3
h x-4
i y-4
j x-1

- 2 a** N
b U
c U
d U
e N
f U
g N
h N
i U
j U
k N
l U

- 3 a** OH, CSL
b SSS
c X
d ALL
e OH, SSS, CSL
f SSS, NTS
g ALL
h NTS
i X
j OH, CSL

- 4 a** 4) + 6)
b 3) + 8)
c 1) + 7)
d 2) + 5)

- 5 b)** c), d), f), h), and j)