

Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Enduring Shame as a Baseline for Conversion

Mark R. Teasdale

E. Stanley Jones Assistant Professor of Evangelism
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

Abstract: This paper argues that conversion is best construed as the willingness of a convert to endure shame for the sake of identifying publicly with Jesus Christ. The paper will demonstrate that this view of conversion is supported by biblical, psychological, anthropological, and missiological scholarship, and that this view of conversion has substantial implications for both the teaching and practice of evangelism.

A Proliferation of Theories

In teaching evangelism, it is not infrequent that I hear some variant of the question, “How do we know if we have done enough?” Given the admittedly inscrutable situation evangelism presents insofar as it deals with the intangibles of human life, students often wonder how they can determine if they have been successful in their evangelistic efforts. This question is complicated by whether evangelism can ever be properly termed “successful” insofar as the biblical witness suggests that evangelism does not require an external response to the faithful sharing of the gospel to measure its effectiveness.¹

¹ David Barrett made this point in his careful study of how the Greek forms of the word “evangelism” are used in the New Testament. David B. Barrett, *Evangelize! A Historical Survey of the Concept* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 1987), 13.

Even in light of the biblical text, it might fairly be asked what the desired result of evangelistic activity is. To this latter question there are a large variety of answers provided in an equally large variety of texts on the topic of evangelism. Each of these resources explains evangelism in its own way, deploying its own set of metrics to determine whether the desired result has occurred within that specific view of evangelism.

At the risk of making a generalization, the desired result of evangelism in all cases is some form of transformation involving Jesus Christ. What this transformation entails varies significantly from one explanation of evangelism to the next, but all explanations desire that evangelism will bring about a transformation in the person being evangelized.

In this paper, I will describe this transformation in terms of conversion.² Even this narrowing, however, does little to resolve the matter, since conversion itself is variously described. A quick review of some of the ideas surrounding conversion in my own Methodist tradition demonstrates this. William Abraham suggests that conversion is a dramatic experience of the grace of God that must be accompanied by significant catechesis in order to initiate someone fully into the Kingdom of God.³ Walter Klaiber

² I recognize that this term is not without its problems. In an age when revivalistic understandings of evangelism have entered into disrepute, the notion of conversion is likewise unpopular. Notwithstanding, the idea of conversion is still common enough in the scholarly study of evangelism that plumbing the term has meaning even if the term is deployed less frequently than it once was.

³ William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 120 ff.

contends that conversion is close to an ontological change wrought in the convert by the grace of God.⁴ Scott Jones points to conversion as an ongoing process of turning away from selfish and sinful habits to holiness.⁵ Bryan Stone argues that conversion takes place when a person adopts new convictions that undergird how that person lives and acts in the world, bringing the person into line with God's shalom as embodied by the community of faith.⁶

Based on this array of possible ways to define what it means to be converted, the question my students ask might be somewhat altered: Is there some commonality in reference to conversion that an evangelist could use as a touchstone for knowing whether a person has indeed become a convert to Jesus Christ? Or, to reframe it pedagogically for those of us who teach evangelism, is there a foundational "trunk" concerning the idea of conversion that we can present to students so that they can then better grasp the various theories about conversion as "branches" growing from that common trunk?

My contention is that there is a foundational aspect of conversion that undergirds the various perspectives on what conversion is. Moreover, it is an aspect of conversion that manifests itself in concrete behavior which can be observed. *This foundation is a*

⁴ Walter Klaiber, *Call & Response: Biblical Foundations of a Theology of Evangelism*, trans. Howard Perry-Trauthig and James A. Dwyer (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 162.

⁵ Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God & Neighbor* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 88-91.

⁶ It should be noted that Stone strenuously objects to conversion being seen as the goal of evangelism. Notwithstanding, conversion is still something that he holds up as a desired outcome to evangelism being practiced. Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press), 257-269.

willingness on the part of the convert to endure shame for the sake of publicly identifying with Jesus Christ. In this article, I will demonstrate that understanding conversion at least as a willingness to endure shame for the sake of publicly identifying with Jesus Christ fits with the biblical witness as well as with studies in the fields of psychology, cross-cultural anthropology, and missiology.

Biblical Witness

Both the Gospels of Mark and Luke relate how Jesus explained that a willingness to endure shame for his sake is essential to being received by himself and the Father at the final judgment. According to the Gospel of Mark Jesus states, “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38, NRSV). The Gospel of Luke recounts: “Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels” (Luke 9:26, NRSV).

In both passages it is amply clear that Jesus expects his followers to endure shame for his sake so that he might not be ashamed of them before his Father and the angels. The Markan passage identifies who it is that would be placing this shame upon the followers of Jesus: “this adulterous and sinful generation,” i.e., those people who hold to cultural values and ideals that conflict with the life Jesus taught and modeled. Confronted by people following the teachings of Jesus, people in the larger culture

would seek to shame those followers of Jesus for breaking with the otherwise commonly held values and practices within the culture. If the follower will refuse to be ashamed to identify with Jesus before this hostile culture, then Jesus will refuse to be ashamed to identify with the follower before the Father and the hosts of heaven.

But what does it mean to “not be ashamed of” Christ and his words? Paul offers the most salient biblical example of a convert who became bold in his public identification with Jesus Christ, often facing extreme cultural shame for it. He met this reality head-on in his strident declaration, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16, NRSV).

That Paul could have been overtaken by shame is clear from the first epistle to the Corinthians. Both Paul’s native Jewish culture and his adopted Gentile culture rejected the gospel he preached. Both gave him reason for feeling shame, one because of the weakness of his crucified messiah, the other because of his foolishness for believing that a god could die (1 Corinthians 1:22-23). Paul refused to be cowed by this potential for shame because he was convinced that “to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24, NRSV). In being willing to endure cultural shame for the sake of holding to Christ publicly, Paul demonstrated a potent proof of his conversion.

In Richard Hays's view, Paul's assertion of not being ashamed of the gospel echoes how the lament psalms are treated in Isaiah. These psalms speak of shame specifically as concerned with the potential for enemies to triumph over the people of God. The author of Isaiah picked up on this motif and reworked it by projecting the hope that God would save the faithful from their enemies, thus removing their shame. Specifically, Hays points to Isaiah 50:7 as important for Paul's claim of not being ashamed of the gospel: "The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame" (Isaiah 50:7, NRSV). Paul, according to Hays, took up this prophecy from Isaiah and modified for his own context.

Significantly, Paul transforms Isaiah's emphatic future negation ("I shall not be ashamed") into a present negation ("I *am* not ashamed"). The present tense of Paul's denial corresponds to the present tense of his declaration that the righteousness and wrath of God *are being* revealed (1:17-18); thus, Isaiah's future hope rebounds through Paul's voice into a new temporal framework defined by God's already efficacious act of eschatological deliverance in Christ.⁷

Rikki Watts offers a further reason that Paul had to contend with the possibility of being shamed: The seeming inconsistency between his gospel and the election of Israel. As Watts puts it, "How could he make the claims he did when his gospel seemed to mean the setting aside not only of Israel's traditions but also of the nation itself?"⁸ It was in answer to this challenge, Watts suggests, that Paul harkened back to the prophecies of

⁷ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 38-39.

⁸ Rikki E. Watts, "For I Am Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Romans 1:16-17 and Habakkuk 2:4" *Romans and the People of God*, ed. Sven K. Sonderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999) 22-23.

Habakkuk, who was likewise struggling with the theodicy of God, and then declared his lack of shame for the gospel because, “in spite of how things look...his gospel is in fact the revelation of the mysterious fulfillment of Yahweh’s promise [to restore Israel].”⁹

David DeSilva, who has emphasized the importance of focusing on shame as a hinging point for understanding the worldview of the New Testament authors, points beyond the example of Paul to show that a fundamental focus of the ancient Christian communities was to encourage converts to seek God’s favor instead of the culture’s favor. Specifically considering the exhortations found in the book of Hebrews, he writes,

The author of Hebrews reinforces the decentering of society’s definition of what constitutes the honorable and shameful and the disregarding of its claim to the right to evaluate one’s honor or dishonor. The believers are called to strive for honor in God’s eyes, whose judgment seat is the court of granting reputation/honor. Where an action or endurance of an action is considered disgraceful by the society but honorable by God and the community, the Christian is called to “despise shame.”¹⁰

This call to despise shame is exemplified by Jesus Christ, who, the author of Hebrews says, “for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, *disregarding its shame*, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2, NRSV, italics added). According to DeSilva, by scorning the shame that the culture placed on the cross, Jesus provided “a paradigm for the Christian minority group of

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ David A. DeSilva, “Despising Shame: A Cultural-Anthropological Investigation of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* vol. 113, issue 3, Fall 1994, 459.

counting as nothing the negative evaluation of the outside world, thinking only of the evaluation of God.”¹¹ It is for this reason that the author of Hebrews calls on Christians to “look...to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2a, NRSV).

Likewise, the great exemplars of faith lifted up in Hebrews are commended precisely because they embodied the example Jesus had set. DeSilva explains that the record of saints in Hebrews 11 is:

By society’s standards...a list of sorry examples, a parade of those who were utterly disgraced and had no honor within society. The author of Hebrews, however, introduces the ironic evaluation...which subverts the world’s system of values and, in effect, disgraces that system. This set of examples encourages the addressees once more to accept having no place in society (in effect, “wandering about in deserts and hills and caves”) and to accept the negative judgment of the public court of opinion (even with its physical abuse) rather than shrink back from such disgraces and lose the great reward. Even if society ascribes disgrace to the believers, they are to despise a disgraceful reputation for the sake of gaining the honor and citizenship that God ascribes.¹²

The combined force of these exemplars listed in Hebrews, which encompass the lives of the saints recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the life of Jesus Christ, argues persuasively that the issue of enduring shame was central to Christians in the ancient church. The early Christians were well aware of their culture’s norms and expectations. They had to decide definitively that they would reject the cultural assessment of shame for being publicly identified with Jesus Christ. This was accomplished most dramatically by the overt proclamation of the gospel message, as seen in the example of

¹¹ Ibid., 446.

¹² Ibid., 450.

Paul. It was by this proclamation that Paul could both show his absolute allegiance to Jesus Christ to the outside world while also proving the legitimacy of his conversion and beliefs to those who questioned him within the church.

It is clear that the biblical witness understood the willingness to endure shame from the larger culture for the sake of publicly identifying with Jesus Christ as an essential sign of conversion. Only a person who was fully committed to the new ways of life prompted by following Jesus would undergo such disgrace. However, this still leaves us with important questions in terms of applicability of this idea. Does this idea work today? If so, what might enduring shame look like and how might it be tied to a convert's faith formation?

Shame, Human Development, and Culture

Since evangelism is, as Abraham wrote, a "field encompassing field,"¹³ it affords us the freedom to seek data and methodology from a great many other fields. We will make use of this opportunity here by turning to behavioral psychology and anthropology.

According to behavioral psychologist Erik Erikson, shame is a developed trait among humans that is directly linked to how humans relate to one another. The emergence of shame is specifically tied to a child's recognition of both his or her own autonomy and the capacity of others to judge how he or she makes use of that autonomy. He states,

¹³ William J. Abraham, "Teaching Evangelism" *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* vol. 17, 2001-2002, 7.

The child who is learning to stand and walk alone becomes quickly aware of the great discrepancy in height and size between him- or herself and adults. In addition to this awareness of smallness, he or she must face the relative ease with which the assertions of infantile autonomy can be overwhelmed or “shamed” by adults or older children.¹⁴

After describing how the feeling of shame develops in children, Erikson then goes on to explain how shame is experienced:

Shame is a visual phenomenon. It derives from a sense of being seen or exposed before one is ready. Exposure means revealing one’s vulnerability or one’s deficiency. The vulnerability or deficiency is not a moral failure. It involves something deeper and more essential to self. The person (or child) who feels shame experiences an exposure to others in which a deficiency in being, an inadequacy intrinsic to self, is on display.¹⁵

From this perspective, shame is understood as intrinsic to human psychological and sociological development. As a person gains ever greater abilities, beginning with the abilities to stand and walk, that person is subject to having those actions scrutinized by others. As the person becomes progressively more aware of this scrutiny, he or she is subject to feeling shame when he or she cannot execute those new abilities according to an established norm enforced by those others.

Erikson’s ideas are helpful to my thesis that a willingness to endure shame for publicly identifying with Jesus Christ is central to conversion. Based on Erikson’s views, all humans would have developed the capacity to feel shame as part of their normal growth. Moreover, this shame is linked to how a person understands his or her choices

¹⁴ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1981), 59.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

and actions in light of what the person perceived to be the authoritative values. One who can assess that the people in his or her setting would cast shame upon him or her for identifying with Jesus Christ, but who uses his or her autonomy to identify publicly with Jesus anyway is one who is a convert to Christ.

Erikson's theories suggest that shame is universal, because all children, regardless of the culture into which they are born, must pass through the stages of developing autonomy. Still, Erikson's theories are culturally bound in their data and analysis.¹⁶ Is there anthropological evidence for suggesting that shame is a common experience across cultures? To determine this, we must turn to cross-cultural anthropological studies.

Several anthropological studies point to the universality of shame across cultural boundaries. This is best seen in a wide variety of studies that attempt to measure or describe the experience of shame in widely disparate cultures. I will detail just a few of these studies here.

¹⁶ Zeba Crook argues strongly against allowing Christian conversion to be absorbed by "psychologism." Crook goes even further to suggest that even an attempt to develop a cross-cultural psychology, as I am about to do in this section of the paper, is methodologically flawed because of its tendency to universalize certain aspects of the human being to the extent of ignoring how extensively the human self is formed by culture. Instead, he suggests that conversion should be viewed solely in terms of specific actions taken by individuals to transfer their loyalty to God. In fact, his argument does not negate mine, since I still require a convert to take a concrete action to show that he or she has overcome shame in the name of Jesus Christ. Since shame is experienced differently in different cultures, Crook's concern for the unique cultural stamp on people's actions is upheld. I simply contend that these cultural actions can be understood as a Christian response to the universal human emotion called shame. See Zeba A. Crook, *Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004).

Agneta Fischer, Antony Manstead and Patricia Rodriguez Mosquera conducted a study on the impact culturally sensitive values have on the expression of shame in Spain and the Netherlands. They selected these two nations because the respective cultures are seen as having contrasting values that would impact the expression of shame in each. They describe the Netherlands as having a culture that highly values individualism, while they describe Spain as an “honor-bound” culture that highly values collectivism.¹⁷ Based on these value descriptors, the authors made four hypotheses about how the two cultures would express shame: First, the Spanish respondents would be more aware of shame and would describe shameful experiences more elaborately. Second, the Dutch respondents would provide descriptions of the experience of shame and the antecedent actions leading to shame by focusing more on self-judgment than on the judgment of others. Third, Spanish respondents would be more willing to share their feelings of shame publicly than Dutch respondents. Fourth, Spanish respondents would be more concerned about how their experience of shame would affect their social relationships while Dutch respondents would be more concerned about how their experience of shame would impact their view of themselves. This last hypothesis they sum up by predicting, “that in Spain, as compared to the Netherlands...shame [would be depicted] as a less negative emotion.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Agneta H. Fischer, Antony S.R. Manstead, and Patricia M. Rodriguez Mosquera, “The Role of Honour-related vs. Individualistic Values in Conceptualising Pride, Shame, and Anger: Spanish and Dutch Cultural Prototypes,” *Cognition and Emotion* vol. 13, 2, 1999, 154.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

After collecting and analyzing their data, the researchers were able to affirm all four of their hypotheses. People from different cultures do describe their experiences of shame differently and also ascribe differing levels of importance to the experience of shame. Importantly for my thesis, this study also affirmed the fact that shame is experienced by people in all cultures, regardless of a culture's core values.

Similar studies, which compare the experience of shame between cultures, have come to the same conclusion. Daniel M. T. Fessler, compared the shame experiences of the residents of a Malay fishing village in the Indonesian province of Bengkulu with the shame experiences of the residents of Southern California. These groups were selected because of the collective social structure of the Malay village as contrasted to the individualistic social-structure of Southern California. Fessler observes that, while the cultures he is studying are radically different in their experiences of shame, the "core aspect of the emotion [of shame] is easily identifiable in [the] two disparate cultures."¹⁹ He goes on to explain that there are certain similarities in the situations that cause people to feel shame in both cultures. Most prominent among these are "a) simple subordination, b) failure to uphold reciprocal relationships, c) failure in prestige competitions, and d) failure to conform to elementary standards."²⁰ Based on this, he is willing to state that "humans should universally experience this emotion."²¹

¹⁹ Daniel M. T. Fessler, "Shame in Two Cultures: Implications in Evolutionary Approaches," in *Journal of Cognition and Culture* vol. 4, issue 2, 2004, 220.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 238.

David Crystal, W. Gerrod Parrott, Yukiko Ozaki, and Hirozumi Watanabe studied the patterns of shame displayed by college students in Japan and in the United States. As with the previous studies, they chose these cultures because of the difference in social structures, with the Japanese culture prizing collectivism and the American culture prizing individualism. In addition to finding that shame was felt by the students in both cultures, albeit in different ways and as a result of different situations, they also report that the experience of shame is seen as universally negative, even to the point of adversely affecting social behavior. As a result, there are strong pressures for people to learn how to ameliorate the experience of shame so that they are not inhibited by it either socially or personally.²²

This sampling of cross-cultural anthropological studies on shame demonstrates that while the various events, expressions and values attached to shame may differ, the possibility exists for humans in all cultures to feel shame. Moreover, as the last study shows, shame is seen as universally negative, even to the point of seriously impairing a person's capacity to relate properly to those around him or her. As a result of this, it is critical for people to find an effective way to deal with shame or, better still, to avoid it.

This universality points to the effectiveness of the description of the convert as one who is willing to endure shame to identify publicly with Jesus Christ. Every convert has the option of being controlled by shame as it is defined in his or her culture. It is in the

²² David Crystal, W. Gerrod Parrott, Yukiko Ozaki, and Hirozumi Watanabe, "Examining Relations between Shame and Personality among University Students in the United States and Japan: A Developmental Perspective," *International Journal of Behavioral Development* vol. 25, issue 2, 2001, 114.

willingness to be the object of this shame in the name of Jesus Christ that the person demonstrates conversion. Moreover, since different cultures maintain different expressions of shame, what it means for a convert to endure shame when identifying publicly with Jesus Christ will vary from culture to culture. For the middle-class, white, North American teenager it may mean being excluded from certain parties because she invited a friend from school to attend a church event. For the sub-Saharan African it may mean losing face because of exempting himself from a tribal ritual involving witchcraft. For the indigenous South American Indian, it may mean risking ostracism in the marketplace for joining a Base Ecclesial Community that works to help end economic exploitation. It does not matter how a culture seeks to shame those who do not follow its norms, the issue is that a convert is willing to endure this shame for the sake of publicly identifying with Jesus Christ within that culture.

Shame in Faith Formation

While the idea that enduring shame for the sake of publicly identifying with Jesus Christ as essential to conversion fits with specific psychological and anthropological data, it is important to test whether it also fits with understandings of how people are formed in faith. To this end, I will consider three views of faith formation developed by James Fowler, Lewis Rambo, and Lamin Sanneh, respectively.

In his book *Stages of Faith* Fowler offers a picture of the development of faith in human beings. Drawing from the stages presented in developmental psychology that describe

how a human matures intellectually and relationally, Fowler lays out six stages of faith.²³ These are: 1) The intuitive-projective, in which a person relies on symbols and rituals to relate to God. 2) The mythic-literal, in which a person begins to learn the narratives of the faith and make sense of the world through those narratives. 3) The synthetic-conventional, in which the person conforms to other people who have a similar religious ideology. 4) The individuative-reflective, in which the person is able to begin reflecting critically on his or her ideology and identity, differentiating the person from the group joined in stage 3. 5) The conjunctive, in which the individual can fully appreciate both the symbols, rituals and stories of his or her own faith as well as the offerings from those who have alternative faiths. 6) The universalizing, in which the individual is committed to a future hope based on his or her faith.

The willingness to endure shame in order to be identified publicly with Jesus Christ fits into several of these stages. It is first apparent in stage 2 when the person begins to develop a new worldview on the basis of the religious narratives which are different from the narratives of the culture. In stage 3, the person is further drawn into this alternative worldview by associating with those who will support him or her in maintaining it. In stage 4, the person struggles with the reality that the way he or she is living in this new community is considered shameful by the larger culture. By the fifth stage, there is sufficient comfort with one's own identity and religious allegiance to let the person begin enacting the faith in a way that is fully conscious of its implications.²⁴

²³ The following condensed descriptions are drawn from Fowler, chapters 16-21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

The sixth stage provides a level of commitment that is informed by a sense of absolutes that transcend immediate cultural forces, thus freeing the person to confront cultural values under religious auspices.²⁵ Fowler gives the example of Mother Theresa as one who was fully mature in her faith as she intentionally faced cultural ostracism for dealing with those whom society has marginalized. While I would not want to suggest that someone needs to reach the level of faith commitment exhibited by Mother Theresa in order to be considered a convert, Fowler's emphasis on a person's consciousness of the implications of his or her faith willingness to remain steadfast in that faith even when the implications are negative fit well with the idea of a convert being defined as one who accepts cultural shame for the sake of publicly identifying with Jesus Christ. These traits develop at the very beginning of the potential convert being exposed to the gospel and grow until the convert becomes both cognizant of and willing to endure the shame the culture expresses toward his or her public identification with Jesus Christ.

Rambo offers a matrix for understanding all the factors that impinge specifically on conversion.²⁶ This matrix includes: 1) Context, which entails the person's cultural setting and the influence this has on a person's life. 2) Crisis, which precipitates the person's willingness to look beyond his or her context. 3) Quest, the intentional attempt by the individual to find answers that will resolve the crisis. 4) Encounter, the point at which the person interacts with an Advocate, who encourages the person to consider a specific confessional answer to the crisis. 5) Interaction, which occurs as the person

²⁵ Ibid., 208-209.

²⁶ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 165-170.

builds relationships with others in the Advocate's confessional community and begins to gain a new identity within that community. 6) Commitment, a "psycho-spiritual experience of surrender" in which the person lets go of his or her old identity in favor of the new, confessional one as a member of the confessional community. 7)

Consequences, which come as a result of the person's commitment and entail the person relearning how to relate to structures he or she had previously related to under the old identity.

As with Fowler's typology, the description of the convert as one who is not ashamed to identify publicly with Jesus Christ can be seen throughout Rambo's points. According to Rambo, from the very beginning of the conversion process the person is struggling with the understanding that his or her faith commitment is in contrast with larger cultural values. The convert finally concludes that he or she is willing to endure the shame of breaking with cultural values through relating to the culture out of the new faith identity he or she has claimed.

Rather than focusing on just the individual, Lamin Sanneh considers how an entire community of converts, is able to mature in its faith. Pointing to the expansion of the Christian faith beyond Jewish borders to the Hellenistic world, he suggests that there are three phases that all Christian communities must pass through: quarantine, syncretism and reform. The quarantine phase involves the community maintaining strict boundaries between itself and its surrounding culture and is usually necessary for

a new Christian community to develop its identity without being diluted by external influences. Over time, however, as the community becomes more certain of its identity, and as the realities of living in the culture continue to impact the community, the community enters into the phase of syncretism. In this phase, the community makes sense of how to be faithful to Jesus Christ as it interacts with the culture. In time, the inevitable tensions that arise from this attempt to enact the faith in the culture pave the road for the reform phase. This phase sees the rise of prophetic and missionary activities by which the community hopes to influence and even transform the culture with the Christian faith.²⁷

As with Fowler and Rambo, the entire process described by Sanneh fits with the idea of people growing in their willingness to endure shame for publicly identifying with Jesus Christ. In the beginning they seclude themselves because they are not yet able to endure this shame, but as they become more secure in their identification with Christ and as they become more capable of expressing that identification in public, they reach a point where they are willing to bear the shame the culture may level at them.

In all three views of faith formation, the process of maturing in the faith entails a person (or community) becoming increasingly aware of the differences between his or her religious claims and the values espoused by the larger culture. Ultimately, this leads to a watershed moment at which the individual must decide whether the cultural values or the faith claims will be the basis for how he or she lives. The committed believer is

²⁷ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 39-42.

the one who decides in favor of identifying publicly with the faith statements even if this means receiving shame from the larger culture. These presentations of faith formation fit exactly with the idea I am putting forward that Christian conversion must at least entail an individual willingly enduring shame for identifying publicly with Jesus Christ. Indeed, they suggest that the entire process of maturing in the faith is premised on precisely the person becoming a convert by willingly breaking with cultural values in favor of religious values.

Continuous Conversion

It is important to recognize that this process of choosing to endure shame for the sake of publicly identifying with Jesus Christ is never accomplished in a final way. While, as the faith formation literature articulates, there may be a crisis point at which the convert initially decides to endure the shame the culture expresses at him or her, the convert must remain willing to endure this shame continuously after this point. Both missiologists and anthropologists explain this in how they describe the ways that converts must continue to negotiate their relationships to their respective cultures after conversion.

Andrew Walls sets his understanding of how the convert relates to culture in the context of differentiating between converts and proselytes. He concludes that proselytes are those who are simply told how to live according to their new religion, forcing them

to withdraw from their culture. Converts, however, are those who struggle to reorient themselves around their allegiance to Christ within their culture. He writes:

Converts have to be constantly, relentlessly turning their ways of thinking, their education and training, their ways of working and doing things, toward Christ. They must think Christ into the patterns of thought they have inherited, into their networks of relationship and their processes for making decisions. And new issues, cultural or intellectual, where it is necessary to make a Christian choice, are arising all the time and with no exact parallels in the past.²⁸

As Walls describes it, converts are in a constant process of considering how to relate to Christ publicly in a way that is culturally meaningful. The result of this is that the convert is also regularly opening himself or herself to endure shame directed at him or her from cultural sources that are offended by these public identifications with Christ.

Secular anthropological research has arrived at similar conclusions as Walls about the need for people to change how they relate to their cultural settings when they undergo a religious conversion. Anthropologist Diane Austin-Broos explains that:

Conversion is a form of passage, a “turning from and to” that is neither syncretism nor absolute breach...Conversion is a cultural passage more robust than this...it becomes a deliberate change with definite direction and shape. To be converted is to reidentify, to learn, reorder, and reorient. It involves interrelated modes of transformation that generally continue over time and define a consistent course.²⁹

As with Walls, Austin-Broos argues that conversion is a difficult middle-way between complete rejection of the convert’s indigenous culture and easily subsuming the new

²⁸ Andrew Walls, “Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church,” in *IBMR* vol. 28, no. 1, January 2004, 6.

²⁹ Diane Austin-Boors, “The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction,” *The Anthropology of Conversion*, eds. Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 1-2.

religious identity into the cultural identity such that the integrity of the religious identity is violated.³⁰ The convert must engage in a daily struggle to remain faithful to his or her religious identity while remaining engaged with his or her culture. Based on my description of what a convert is, the supremacy of the religious identity over the cultural identity comes from the willingness of the convert to identify publicly with Jesus Christ even in situations that would bring shame in the convert's culture.

Both Walls and Austin-Broos bring out the fact that conversion is not a punctiliar action, completed at one time with no progression from that point. Rather, conversion is on-going, requiring the convert constantly to assess his or her cultural interactions in the light of his or her new religious identity.³¹

This on-going struggle of the convert to relate to his or her culture under the auspices of identification with Christ, and especially to relate in a way that allows the convert to engage in actions that may engender shame within the culture, does not only affect the convert. The society in which the convert enacts his or her faith is necessarily impacted

³⁰ There is no small debate about the actual nature of syncretism. Here it is accepted in the usage that became common in the mid-twentieth century after Visser 't Hooft's book *No Other Name* made syncretism a byword for the blending of the Christian faith into culture in a way that causes the faith to lose its unique characteristics (as opposed to enculturation, which is the appropriate missionary activity of translating the faith into understandable symbols and language for another culture to adopt it). However, it is noted that, especially among anthropologists, syncretism is understood to be a neutral process that cannot be avoided and that does not suggest a loss of religious integrity in the face of culture. See, for example, Charles Steward and Rosalind Shaw, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

³¹ This acknowledgment itself is a shift in paradigm in approaching conversion. Traditionally, the dramatic, sudden conversion of Paul on the Damascus Road has been seen as the archetypal conversion, both in religious and secular circles. The idea of conversion as an on-going negotiation with culture is relatively new. See Bryant, 181 and Andrew Buckser, "Social Conversion and Group Definition in Jewish Copenhagen," *The Anthropology of Conversion*, eds. Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 80-81.

by the convert's willingness to challenge social norms in the name of Jesus Christ.

Massimo Leone, using a psychodynamic analysis, probes the interrelation of religious conversion and social controversy. Using the metaphors of monologues and dialogues, Leone argues that social controversy develops because the convert, who is attempting to remain in dialogue with culture, is perceived as soliloquizing. The convert is not seen as "respecting the rules of good dialogical interaction" within the culture because of his or her unique belief system.³² Leone goes on to state that, once a person has become a convert, that person is often viewed as an enemy to those within their society.³³

Gauri Viswanathan develops a thesis that provides a good addition to Leone's idea. The new identity of the convert is a disruptive force in society, threatening the societal order. She writes in the preface to her book *Outside the Fold*,

In its most transparent meaning as a change of religion, conversion is arguably one of the most unsettling political events in the life of a society. This is irrespective of whether conversion involves a single individual or an entire community...Not only does conversion alter the demographic equation within a society and produce numerical imbalances, but it also changes the established community's assent to religious doctrine and practices. With the departure of members from the fold, the cohesion of a community is under threat just as forcefully as if its beliefs had been turned into heresies.³⁴

Viswanathan explains how new religious values that advocate a willingness to be shamed in order to remain faithful to those values can be understood as profoundly

³² Massimo Leone, *Religious Conversion and Identity: The Semiotic Analysis of Texts* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), 68.

³³ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁴ Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), xi.

disruptive to the social order. If cultural values attached to shame help maintain social order by alerting members of a society as to what are appropriate and inappropriate ways to act, then the introduction of converts who eschew any concern for shame because of their new religious allegiance would shake the social order to its very core. Based on this, it is no surprise that numerous governments throughout history have sought to regulate or forbid conversion to religions outside of those that had already been proven to coexist peacefully with a society's cultural values. It also explains why converts must constantly and intentionally renegotiate their relationship within their societies, lest the cultural pressure to conform to the society overwhelm their religious allegiance.

Implications for Practice

If a person is willing to endure shame for the sake of identifying publicly with Jesus Christ, that person is an indisputable convert to the Christian faith. Biblical, psychological, anthropological and missiological evidence all points to this. While various scholars and practitioners may want to argue in favor of additional markers for conversion, these markers will branch off of this foundational understanding of conversion.

Having such an understanding of conversion has several implications for both the teaching and practicing of evangelism:

1. In teaching, the various theories of evangelism can be organized around helping students understand their relationship to moving those being evangelized toward conversion. For evangelists, it offers them observable evidence of whether those they are evangelizing have come to a place of conversion.
2. For evangelists and local congregations, it provides a more nuanced approach for engaging in evangelism. Recognizing that conversion entails a complex web of personal faith development, relationships with a faith community, and negotiating one's identity within the larger culture, the evangelist or congregation has many more avenues to explore with those being evangelized beyond the traditional single-focus evangelistic efforts, e.g., engaging in apologetics to overcome the evangelized's intellectual doubts about the Christian faith or calling the evangelized person to live according to biblical principles. A more robust practice of evangelism, one that includes the capacity to engage with those being evangelized on many levels of life (intellectual, cultural, moral, etc.) is demanded. It also calls for the evangelist or congregation to be willing to walk with the evangelized person for a lengthy period of time as the person comes to a place of being willing to endure shame for publicly identifying with Jesus.
3. Along the same lines, this view of conversion calls evangelists and local congregations to consider whether their practice of evangelism takes into account the fact that conversion is not a one-time event. Evangelism should not

only introduce people to Jesus, but draw those who respond positively to the invitation into a lifelong process of discipleship.

4. For teachers of evangelism, this view of conversion offers a means of centering students from radically different theological perspectives. For those students who only see conversion as a single crisis decision, this view can help broaden them to consider the implications of converts having to engage meaningfully in the broader culture. For those students who adopt a more progressive view of Christianity that eschews the notion of conversion, it calls them to recognize that they must make some normative claim about how a Christian must live.
5. For teachers, evangelists, and congregations alike, this view of evangelism points to the fact that the theology used in evangelism matters. This view of evangelism does not make any specific claim about who Jesus is. It is up to the teacher, evangelist, or congregation to make certain that they provide excellent catechesis for the convert so that the convert does not end up willingly accepting shame for a heretical view of Christ.
6. Finally, this view of conversion unapologetically sets a high bar for someone to claim to be a convert, requiring that person to daily renew their willingness to accept shame for being publicly identified with Jesus. This is intentional and points to the fact that, this side of glory, conversion is never a completed action.

A critical corollary to this is that while the teacher of evangelism or the evangelist may have more experience in being converted than the person being evangelized, all equally stand in need of being called back to Jesus regularly. Evangelism becomes less the final answer from those who have passed the test than it becomes a means of inviting others to come alongside the teacher and the evangelist as they all accept the shame of identifying with Jesus publicly.

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