

## ***Conversion (1959)***

### **PREFACE by Anne Mathews-Younes**

“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3) What did Jesus mean by this verse? E. Stanley Jones believed Jesus divided all mankind into those who had been born again and those who had not. The act of conversion is as integral to Jones’ theology and his life as it was, according to the scriptures, to Jesus. There was scarcely a book, a sermon, or a conversation with Jones that did not inevitably return to and dwell upon this subject. He believed the human need for conversion was everywhere. According to Jones, “Conversion is the penitent, receptive response to the saving divine initiative in Christ, resulting in a change, gradual or sudden, by which one passes from the kingdom of self to the Kingdom of God and becomes a part of a living fellowship, the church” (Jones, *Conversion*, 55). Here is an account of E. Stanley Jones’ own conversion. My religious experiences and expression began at age five when at church I tried to call attention to myself – all dressed up in a fine **CONVERSION** new suit – by passing around a collection plate to the adults chatting after service. In retrospect, I realized that I had ‘unwittingly run into the central problem in religion, the problem of the self-assertive self’(Jones, *A Song of Ascents*, 26).

At about the age of 15, I was in the gallery of Memorial Church in Baltimore, with a group of friends...The speaker was an Englishman, a man of God and at the close of his address he pointed his finger to where we were seated and said, “Young men, Jesus said, ‘He that is not with me is against me.’” It went straight to my heart. It shook me so I took my place among the seekers. I wanted the Kingdom of God, and I wanted reconciliation with my heavenly Father, but I took church membership as a substitute. I felt religious for a few weeks and then it all faded out and I was back again exactly where I was before, the springs of my character and my habits unchanged. I had been horizontally converted, but not vertically. As I look back, I am not sorry that I went through that half conversion which was a whole failure. For the fact that I got out of that failure into the real thing may be used to encourage those who have settled down to a

compromised stalemate with no note of victory. The real thing came two years later. An evangelist, Robert J. Bateman, came to Memorial Church. I said to myself, "I want what he has." This time I was deadly serious. I wanted the real thing or nothing. I found myself running the mile to the church. I went into the church and took a front row seat. But I was all eagerness for the evangelist to stop speaking, so I could get to that altar of prayer. When he did stop, I was the first one there. I had scarcely bent my knees when Heaven broke into my spirit. I had him — Jesus — and He had me. We had each other. I belonged. This was a seed moment. The whole of my future was packed into it (Jones, *A Song of Ascents*, 26ff). Jones second conversion at the age of seventeen changed the course of his life. From that day until the day of his death, Jesus was his unrivalled focus. Jones made conversion the central issue in the life of a follower of Jesus.

In conversion, according to Jones, Christianity asks us to take the one thing we own (the self) and give it back to God. In surrendering the self, we may naturally fear nothing will be left. We may wonder how we are to live without the self, the part of us where we keep all our identity, value, and worth in this world. The response seems paradoxical, for it is in the total surrender of one's life that one finds the true meaning and joy in life: "Conversion is Life (Jesus) impinging on life, awakening it, unifying it, making it care, and making it love" (Jones, *Conversion*, 61). But the surrendered self no longer accommodates to the pattern and values of this world, for it has been liberated from these demands and placed in the hands of Jesus. The self is now free! Jones affirms that the fruits of conversion are the best things to happen to society since the beginning of the human race. (Jones, *Conversion*, 145). Conversion produces, according to Jones, an "altered relationship with God, which produces an altered relationship with yourself, with your neighbor, with nature, and with the universe. You are no longer working against the grain of the universe – you are working with it" (Jones, *Conversion*, 147). The Rev. Dr. Joon-Sik Park, the E. Stanley Jones Professor of World Evangelism at the Methodist Theological School in Ohio writes, "For Jones, every moment and every encounter held the potential for conversion and his task as a missionary evangelist was to preach Christ with the assurance that "it is possible for anybody who is created in God's image to be re-created in that image." Park adds that the church must take to heart these words of warning from Jones: "When the church loses its power to convert,

it loses its right to be called a church;” and unless it is transforming people’s life into the likeness of Christ, “it is failing as a church of the living Christ.” (Park, E. Stanley Jones & Sharing the Good News in a Pluralistic Society, 58). In the mid-1950s Jones decided to write a book on Conversion. He felt such a book was needed because only a third of church members knew what conversion was through first-hand experience. This is the book you now hold in your hands. This edition would not have been possible without the assistance of the Rev. Shivraj Mahendra whose publishing, editing and theological skills were essential to the project’s success. I don’t know how Shivraj finds the time to move these E. Stanley Jones reprinting projects forward with his customary speed, expertise, and precision. I am deeply grateful to him. Nicholas Younes contributed his considerable editing expertise to ensure that the text is clear and doggedly pursued the needed annotations. Veronica Henry has beautifully created a YouTube sharing video about this book which contributes to its dissemination. I am surrounded by gifted people and am truly blessed because of them. I trust in turn you will be blessed by this book.

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**Foreword by Douglas M. Strong**

Hearing the word “Conversion,” conjures up a number of different thoughts—some good and some not so good. For many, the concept of conversion may seem negative, suggesting times when someone coerced someone else to become religious, or to change from one religion to another—often through manipulation. But for many others, the concept of conversion is highly positive, evoking a time when they joyfully experienced God’s presence. The linguistic origins of the term clearly point to this second, more favorable understanding. The word “conversion” came into the English language around 1300, borrowed from French and Latin roots. It initially designated any action that alters something radically or turns something about. Soon thereafter—by 1340—the old English Psalter, a Christian songbook, referred to the word for the first time with a religious connotation. The Psalter used the term to depict anyone whose way of life changed from sin to righteousness. In this sense, believers are “converted” whenever they make a spiritual turn in their lives. When conversion is understood in this specifically religious sense, as a thorough going transformation from one spiritual perspective to another, the term Conversion relates closely to the New Testament idea of repentance. Repentance, like conversion, describes a shift from one mode of action to another—a 180-degree reversal in one’s behavior, away from sin and toward godliness. Folks who talk about their conversion often express feelings of forgiveness and release from guilt. Because they receive a divine assurance when conversion occurs (a “peace that passes understanding”—Philippians 4:7), many come to see this experience as the most important event in their lives. Conversion provides them with a fresh start, a new lease on life, an opportunity to begin again. Such freshness offers the promise of a hopeful future of faithfulness in God, with encouraging possibilities for those who previously had only known disappointment, failure, or heartache.

Throughout the Church’s history, many well-known Christians narrated accounts of a conversion experience. Some of the most famous conversions occurred in the lives of Paul the Apostle, Augustine of Hippo, Francis of Assisi, and Ignatius of Loyola. Each of

these Christian leaders had a dramatic religious turnaround: Paul on the Damascus road or Augustine in the garden of Milan, for instance. Paul's experience of seeing a flashing light, getting thrown to the ground, and hearing a voice from heaven (Acts 9), became the prototype for powerful conversions like his. When people told these conversion stories in the earliest centuries of Christian history, their accounts often stressed the somewhat idiosyncratic or isolated nature of their encounters with Jesus. Such startling experiences weren't expected of everyone. In contrast to one-of-a-kind, sudden conversions, most people in the early and medieval Church had less sensational initiations into the life of faith: their turn toward God usually occurred gradually and incrementally. Until the modern period (and still today, for many Christians), conversion to God in most people's minds was connected to the regular liturgical acts of the Church—through the sacraments of baptism, first holy communion (with confession), and confirmation. Vivid experiences of faith were fine, but participation in the sacramental life of the Church was most essential. During the Reformation, Christian leaders who spoke about their personal religious commitments did so in an understated manner. They described their conversions quite matter-of-factly and usually didn't dwell on emotional or climactic aspects of their experiences. Martin Luther was typical, when he wrote retrospectively about his spiritual breakthrough: "I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates." Likewise, John Calvin briefly described what happened to him in 1533. He wrote, simply: "God, by a sudden conversion, brought me to a teachable frame of mind." Understandings about conversion in the English-speaking world changed during the time of the Puritans, at the beginning of the modern era, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Puritans believed that spiritual turnarounds should be outwardly observable and inwardly palpable. Externally, the upstanding moral behavior of those "elected" by God for salvation would indicate that a conversion took place. Internally, Puritans stressed that believers' encounters with God ought to be so lifechanging that they could "narrate" their conversion. That is, "saved" persons should be able to tell others verbally about their experiences with God. The Church, Puritans taught, was comprised only of predestined "visible saints" who could describe their conversion in an extensive manner. Following the Puritan era, the idea that conversions

can—and should—be narrated by believers underwent a transition. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, and from then through the nineteenth century (and beyond), the religious movement known as evangelical revivalism emphasized that conversions were not experiences for just a few particularly pious individuals, but were available for everyone. Vast numbers of men and women turned to faith. In America, these heartstirring experiences occurred during a century of revivalist preaching known as the First and Second Great Awakenings. Among evangelicals, conversions were affective, highly emotional encounters with the Holy Spirit. All people could have a powerful peak experience with God, and once that occurred, those converted were expected to testify to their experience. The egalitarian aspect of evangelical conversion—that everyone’s sins require repentance but also that everyone could be saved— opened up the Christian faith to people previously excluded. The revivals empowered, for example, women, African Americans, and other people of color. When men and women began to see that conversions were accessible to anyone, since God’s “amazing grace” was given freely to all,

CONVERSION then everyone could see him or herself as spiritually equal to everyone else. Such definitive regenerative events were understood by evangelicals as the usual, normative way to become initiated into the Christian faith. Participating in the sacraments of the Church and liturgical practices were still useful, but a conversion experience was essential—the exact opposite of the medieval Catholic understanding. John Wesley, George Whitefield and, later, Richard Allen, Charles Finney, Amanda Berry Smith, Dwight L. Moody and hundreds of other evangelical preachers stressed the significance of being “born again” (John 3:16 and 1 Peter 1:3). True faith could occur only through a decisive, direct interaction with God. Wesley, for example, whose “heart was strangely warmed” during a small group meeting at Aldersgate Street in London, in 1738, taught that an “assurance of faith” or “witness of the Spirit” following the “new birth” was absolutely necessary if anyone hoped to be a “real Christian.” In the nineteenth century, multiday revival services, known as camp meetings, ramped up this emphasis. Every camp meeting included strong appeals for people to declare their faith in Christ publicly. While camp meetings were originally ecumenical gatherings, it was the Methodists who employed these outdoor events with utmost fervor. Francis Asbury,

the first Methodist bishop, believed that camp meetings allowed his denomination to “fish with a large net”—providing opportunities for thousands of people to be converted. This evangelistic strategy was helpful to Methodist pastors, since they were required to report annually to their conference (regional judicatory) about the number of conversions recorded through their ministry. Camp meeting revivalism tended to dwell on the momentariness of conversion in response to the preacher’s call to come to the altar. Each individual needed to make an overt decision for Christ. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly among Methodists, this “decisionist” emphasis combined with a renewed stress on the Wesleyan doctrine of holiness. In addition to the initial plea for sinners to be “saved,” ministers also implored people to be “sanctified.” Christians were expected to make a second decision for Christ, in order to receive God’s “second blessing” of grace—another conversion, if you will.

This “Holiness movement” dominated much of the evangelistic preaching of the Victorian era and later. Congregants heard appeals to be converted from sin and converted to holy living, a true repentance of turning around in the other direction. E. Stanley Jones was socialized into this religious milieu. His own conversion occurred when, at the age of seventeen, he stepped forward to the altar rail of his home congregation at Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church in west Baltimore, in response to the entreaties of a visiting evangelist. The four years that he spent at Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky—a Holiness school—accentuated this conversionist ethos for Jones. He never lost his interest in conversion, but modified it over the years in response to his broad experience with other world religions and cultures, as well as his exposure to various concepts from the study of psychology. Jones’s version of conversion was less scripted and less decisionist than many other evangelists—which caused him to be contrasted with such twentieth century figures as Billy Graham, who typically insisted on a public response to faith. Conversion, for Jones, entailed something very simple, yet profound: everyone could encounter God as a person, through a loving relationship with Jesus. Jones believed that every individual could know God’s love and therefore be transformed. This promise from God offered hope for those previously hopeless and encouragement for those needing the courage to live each day victoriously. Such a

promise is still needed today, perhaps more desperately than ever, and that's why Jones's book is so relevant for this particular moment in history.

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