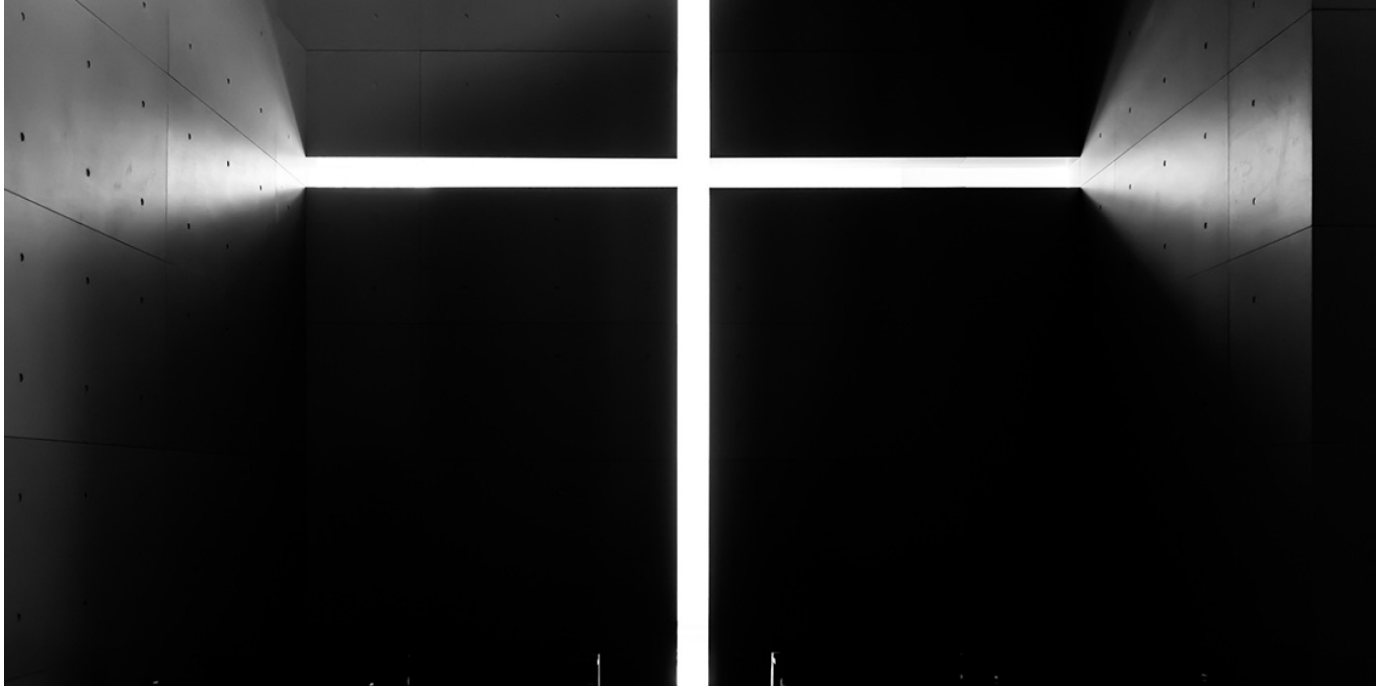


Three reasons progressive Christians shouldn't give up on conversion

## Is it the baby or the bathwater?

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [July 27, 2022](#) issue



(Photo © xxwp / iStock / Getty)

Does the church today actually want to convert people? If so, we're pretty coy about it. And we're plenty articulate about why it's not such a great idea.

We point out that conversion is all about the airport and silent about the trip. Christianity, we maintain, is about discipline and faithfulness—not one moment that solves and settles everything. We highlight that conversion is a way of making faith all about me and my experience at the center of God's attention. An utter focus on God can be a mask for total focus on oneself and complete disregard for justice in one's relationships and society more broadly.

We suspect that conversion keys into our profound desire to fit in and please and conform and belong. We identify it as a tactic of cultural imperialism, by which people are manipulated by those who wield religion as power.



So why hold on to conversion despite all these reasons not to? I suggest we let go of the obsession with it being sudden and marked by fireworks and of the need to impress people with just how ghastly a person you used to be. Instead, we need to focus on three things that conversion is really about.

**1. Christianity is a priceless blessing and a profound good.** Through faith in what God has done it can heal the wounds of our past. Through hope in what God will do it can dismantle our anxiety about the future. Through the transformation of our past through faith and our future through hope it can enable us in the present to love. This isn't the thoughtless imposition of an imperialistic agenda; it's the humble sharing of deep truth. It's not shouting, "You have to believe this to belong." It's saying, "Try this, it actually works."

There was a kind couple who used to have me for lunch when I was on my own and often discouraged. She loved church; he never wanted much to do with it. While relatively young she was debilitated by a distressing disease and couldn't get to church. So he drove her there on Sundays and read a book in the parking lot. Eventually she died. The funeral was at that same church.

A few months later, to everyone's amazement, he started attending the church himself. Asked why, he replied, "It was the way you cared for my wife. I thought, I want to be part of a community that cares like that. And I want to discover what makes people care like that." That's what it means for Christianity to be a priceless blessing and a profound good. That's the discovery that Christianity actually works. That's conversion.

**2. We place trust in the notion of change.** When we pray for the heart of Vladimir Putin to soften, when we long for a person from whom we're estranged to get back in touch, when we work to transform humanity's relationship to our planet, we're putting all our eggs in the basket of change. There will always be some kinds of science and some kinds of religion that maintain nothing ever changes. But change is in the character of creation, and sometimes situations and people can change for the better. Conversion is the name for the way a person's heart and soul and actions can change for good when they encounter the embrace of God's ever-loving arms.

Some time ago I met a man who'd been in prison. For him prison was a gift: it was a public humiliation and final visible statement that the way he'd been leading his life



was wrong and unsustainable. While in prison he came to Christian faith and decided to live his life truthfully and selflessly. He found himself utterly alone—but it turned out he was alone with God.

His life since prison has indeed been very different. He'd be the last to say he is now beyond reproach, but he's certainly a very different character from the chancer and opportunist that got into such trouble before. He's a changed man. That change involved humiliation, hardship, and humility. But fundamentally the name for that change is conversion.

**3. Out of the deepest hostility the greatest good can come.** Out of the exile came ancient Israel's new insight that the God they thought was for them was actually something much better—a God who was with them. Out of the horror of the cross and the tomb came Christ's glorious resurrection. Out of the threat-breathing, plot-calculating life of Saul of Tarsus came the apostle Paul, who brought Christianity to the gentiles and without whose work of converting the Roman world none of us would be reading this magazine today.

This conviction—this trust—is perhaps the hardest part of Christianity to believe. But it is the most wonderful to behold. Through conversion the Holy Spirit takes the worst in the world, the worst in our society, the very worst parts of ourselves and turns them into the principal instruments of God's kingdom and channels of Christ's peace. That's Christianity.

Let's not give up on conversion just yet.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Conversion is still good news."*