

# Comparing Modern-Day Alternatives to Biblical Conversion

*What are the modern-day alternatives to biblical conversion? It is absolutely imperative that we understand the modern aberrant teachings about conversion including the history of this development. To the degree that we understand the false from the true can we de-westernize the Gospel, appropriate the Biblical message of conversion for ourselves, and then proclaim its supernatural power and life changing message of turning to God to the needy world and all its peoples.*

by David F. Wells

**T**he world is filled with conversion stories. An alcoholic turns from drink to sobriety. A Western student's life is changed by the teachings of an Eastern guru. One person joins a cult; another rejects it. A Hindu family believes the soul of their departed loved one has "trans-migrated" to a new body and been reborn. Although such conversions may be precipitated by dramatic crises and result in changed behavior, they are not Christian conversions. They do not have Christ as their cause and object and his service as their result. They do not involve turning from sin to God by means of the Holy Spirit's work. They are not based on the substitutionary death and resurrection of Christ.

This article dealing with Christian conversion was written for two reasons. First, conversion is the only way one can enter the family of God, and so it is important that we have a thorough understanding of it.<sup>1</sup> Second, there are external and internal challenges to the Christian concept of conversion, and we need to understand them. Externally, Christian conversion is opposed on religious and ideological grounds by those who are hostile to the Christian faith. Internally, many churches and denominations have failed to preserve and teach the biblical view of conversion. In this article I mainly want to focus on the internal challenge of this all important crucial matter.

## THE WIDER THEOLOGICAL WORLD

The most important question to ask about conversion is "What does the Bible teach?" not "What have past generations thought?" nor "What sort of conversion experiences have people had?" Because all Christians think they are biblical in their doctrine, it is important that we understand what individual Christians mean by biblical and how the Bible functions in their lives and church. Furthermore, we need to know how the Bible *should function* in our lives.

This article was written from a self-consciously evangelical point of view. However, as the Reformers taught, the Word of God alone is the sole infallible criterion for all Christian thought and action, and its function as such is an unending one. Each generation must allow the Word of God to reform its thoughts and actions. A commitment to the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures is a commitment to allowing them to judge and guide our beliefs. Therefore in we must measure everything, evangelicals included, by the Word of God, for we assume that no evangelical would want to believe and act in ways that violate biblical truth.

In the first section, I will focus on the non-evangelical portion of the Protestant world, as the subset of Protestants that comes to expression in the World Council

of Churches (WCC). The WCC has fostered many of the major alternatives to biblical conversion, and so we must examine these aberrant teachings and the history of their development.<sup>2</sup> The nineteenth century was one of astonishing evangelical vitality that resulted in the formation of several significant Christian youth movements and in two famous mission conferences: New York (1900) and Edinburgh (1910). The latter conference gave rise to the International Missionary Council (1921). This organization, along with the Life and Work movement and the Faith and Work movement, developed into the World Council of Churches (1948).

Over time, the evangelical voice in the WCC became increasingly muted and the evangelical concern for personal conversion has become progressively disparaged. The blame for this is twofold: First, non-evangelicals have opposed the biblical gospel, and second, evangelicals have been guilty of anti-intellectualism. In part, the latter problem may be attributed to evangelicalism's roots in the laity of the Church, which traditionally has not been concerned with theology. During the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the early part of this century, many evangelicals were openly anti-intellectual and not interested in serious theological debate. They abandoned the field of theology to non-evangelicals, whose unbiblical ideas on conversion began to take root.

The non-evangelical ideas influenced the International Missionary Council and (IMC) were reflected in the proceedings of that organization's world conferences in Jerusalem (1928) and Madras (1938). On the one side, evangelicals maintained that sin can be forgiven only through faith in Christ's substitutionary death and that salvation by grace through faith excludes the possibility of salvation on any other grounds—for example, on the basis of human will or good works. On the other side, non-evangelicals repudiated the evangelical understanding of conversion and argued that non-Christian religions were valid forms whose contents could be infused with Christian thinking without requiring conversion to Christianity. Some evangelical missionary agencies, like the China Inland Mission in 1916 and the Christian and Missionary Alliance in 1932, were offended and dismayed by this false gospel and withdrew from the IMC. Opposition between evangelical and non-evangelical views of the gospel became so intense that the ecumenist Joseph Oldham characterized these streams of thought as two different religions, as did the evangelical J. Gresham Machen in his trenchant analysis *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923).

The ecumenical non-evangelical understanding of conversion gave rise to the social gospel on the one hand and to vision of a world religion on the other. Each of these theologies has a distinctive, non-biblical way of understanding conversion.

## Social Gospel Theologies

Few theologies have tried harder or more deliberately to invalidate the evangelical view of conversion than the theology of the "social gospel." This is true of the social gospel's original form in the liberalism of the mid-1900s and of its more recent manifestations in theologies of secularization, revolution, and liberation.

Walter Rauschenbusch is the father of the modern social gospel. Dissatisfied with the results of his parish ministry among German immigrants at the Second German Baptist Church in New York City, he went to England to get acquainted with that country's new social movements and then to Germany to study exegetical and systematic theology. While Rauschenbusch was in Germany, he was influenced by liberal luminaries such as Albert Ritschl, Julius Wellhausen, Adolf von Harnack, and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Their teachings revolutionized his former evangelical understanding of the gospel. Rauschenbusch returned to America to teach theology at his *alma mater*, Rochester Seminary, where he began to promulgate his new version of the gospel. His first book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), renounced the individualistic and futuristic orientation of pietism, while trying to preserve its spiritual dynamics.

The gospel according to Rauschenbusch presents salvation as a corporate, not an individual, process. According to Rauschenbusch the origin of sin is not rebellion against a holy Creator but social alienation from one another. Sinful acts are those that alienate us from one another. Following Schleiermacher, Rauschenbusch transferred the root of sin from the human heart to society. The effects of each person's sins condition the behavior of all other persons. Rauschenbusch rejected the biblical picture of Satan as a personal, sinful seducer and substituted the prevailing socioeconomic and political evils of his day in Satan's place.<sup>3</sup>

According to the social gospel, salvation means overcoming the world's socioeconomic needs in the "kingdom of God." Rauschenbusch taught that the "kingdom of God" is a present, ethical-religious condition that is found in the lives of those who practice the ethics of Jesus. This kingdom, which begins as a personal, experiential reality, is to be established as a political reality through corporate human effort. In the political

theologies favored by the WCC, this has implied that the task of Christians, churches, and mission agencies is to join liberation struggles against racism and oppressive political systems.

It is easy to understand why the social gospel was seen as undercutting the theological foundations of the evangelical missionary movement. The sense of the eternal lostness of unbelievers, which had caused agony to young Hudson Taylor and motivated thousands of evangelical missionaries to rush into the newly opened areas of Asia to rescue the souls of "China's millions," was gone with the wind. Indeed, according to Rauschenbusch concern for personal salvation is "close to refined selfishness." Rauschenbusch expressed his understanding of the missionary imperative this way: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and the salvation of your souls will be added to you... our religious individuality must get its interpretation from the supreme fact of social solidarity."

These new ideas soon began to influence the younger generation. In 1902 at a meeting of the World Student Christian Federation, H. de Bie from Holland urged Christians not to be content with conversion only but to strive to make their nations Christlike. The focus of this new gospel shifted away from a concern to see sinners receive eternal life through reconciliation to Christ and move towards a concern for humanizing the impoverishing and oppressive socioeconomic structures that cause misery. The righteousness of God, the fulcrum in Paul's doctrine of justification by faith, gave way to social justice as the primary expression of Christ's lordship over the Church and world.

## NEW TERMINOLOGY

This new gospel in time required new terminology. Justification was replaced by humanization. The older evangelical notion of "man turning towards God" was replaced by the new idea of "God turning towards men" (for example, at Uppsala in

1968). The older theology of “bringing people to Christ” was supplanted by the new theology of “finding true humanness.” As the Indian theologian M. M. Thomas explained, conversion has to do with finding freedom from all that binds and oppresses human beings—not with turning to God in faith and repentance. Thus according to the “new gospel” conversion is not a redemptive act of God but a human work of cooperation with the forces of justice. Advocates of this new gospel deliberately have left the phrase the forces of justice ambiguous. In practice, however, they have identified these forces with left-wing political agendas.

The heart of the new gospel is captured in the title of Hans-Jurgen Schultz’s aptly named book *Conversion to the World* (1967). According to Schultz, the god Mammon does not reside in human hearts but in social structures. Thus God is not at work to change human hearts but to liberate social structures. Given such a gospel, it is no wonder that Philip Potter’s sentiment came to prevail in WCC circles. According to Potter, evangelistic missions that invite personal faith in Christ and his saving work “have been rightly condemned in all our ecumenical conferences,” the traditional gospel has produced “introversion,” in whose place Potter proposed “dialog” with religiously minded people. Potter’s advocacy of “dialog” is a bridge to the second major development in liberal theology—the idea of a world religion.

## World Religion

According to Friedrich Schleiermacher, the essence of all religions is a “feeling of absolute dependence” upon a transcendent power. This feeling is universal and is shared by all people—it is an integral part of our humanity. Religions are man’s attempt to explain and understand this feeling of absolute dependence. Therefore, Christianity is a religion that differs from other religions only in degree—not in kind. Other religions are

not untrue; Christianity is simply more true. Thus at the Edinburgh Conference (1910), even John Mott urged missionaries to make connections with the “rays of light” in other religions.

In the decades that followed the 1910 conference, comparative religion developed as a science and provided a complete

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theological agenda for ecumenists. According to this new discipline, a mysterious and undefinable reality lies at the center of all human experience, as Rudolph Ott argued in *The Phenomenon of the Sacred*. Comparative religion was a ready mate for the other great fascination of that time—the theory of evolution. Together they provided the ground for believing that human consciousness of the divine gradually emerged in history in the form of different religions. Advocates of this idea seldom considered that the transcendent, mysterious reality that supposedly lies at the center of human existence might also be the realm of the demonic, as Paul teaches (Acts 26:18; 1 Cor. 10:20; Eph. 2:1-3; 6:10-12).

This evolutionary line of thought has consistently been represented in WCC thinking. For example, it gave rise to the study project “The Work of God and the Living Faiths of Men” (July 1956), which

formally opened up the WCC to other religions. At the WCC’s Third Assembly (New Delhi, 1961), what had been a stream became a torrent. Once again, using the assembly’s theme of Christ as “The Light of the World,” there was a curt repudiation of evangelical missions. According to this conference, the gospel has nothing to do with a unique disclosure of God in Christ nor with a unique, redemptive work of God through Christ. Instead, the gospel is about the “cosmic Christ,” the mediator of creation who is universally perceived in all religions. As people pursue their own liberation, Christ emerges in their ideologies, regardless what these ideologies may be. The culmination of this line of thought came at the WCC’s “Program on Dialog with Other Religions and Ideologies” (Addis Ababa, 1971). According to this conference, “dialog” is by no means a Christian cover-up for the traditional gospel or an attempt to win converts to this gospel. Instead, dialog is a Christian way of showing respect for other religions, and it provides an entry into the wide spirituality that all religions share.

## Missio Dei

Among missiologists, this kind of ecumenical and interreligious thinking has been captured in the notion of *Missio Dei*. The component ideas for this new understanding of missions have come from many different sources: from Karl Barth, came universalism; from Fredrick Gogarten came the thought that secularization is the way the gospel liberates people today; from Alfred North Whitehead and others came the belief that the being of God is merged in the stuff of creation and together, in dependence on one another, they are in process and evolution; from the WCC itself came the social gospel and the endorsement of other religions.

According to this new concept of mission, the trinitarian God is involved as creator, redeemer, and renewer through-

out the process of human history. He does not transcend history as a personal, supernatural being. Instead, he is to be identified prophetically as the hidden force in human history that unceasingly drives it toward its final destination: the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup> Thus all human movements that promote the goal of a new humanity in a world community, including nascent non-Christian religions and theistic ideologies, are to be seen as instruments in the *Missio Dei*. As such the church must treat them as allies in a common mission, for they, too, serve the cosmic Christ, regardless of whether they mention his name.

### ROMAN CATHOLIC PARALLELS

This new ecumenical approach to other religions, as expressed in the WCC's Dialogue Program, has a Roman Catholic parallel. In 1961 Catholic dogmatician Karl Rahner set forth his theory of the "anonymous Christian." According to Rahner, God desires the salvation of all people through Jesus Christ. Although only a minority of people know Jesus by name, God has ordained other religions as channels through which he grants salvation to the religions' adherents. Salvation granted in this manner is based on the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Only after the Christian gospel has been presented to the adherents of other religions in an existentially challenging way can they consciously accept Jesus as their savior. After consciously receiving Christ as their Savior, they do not pass from damnation to salvation but simply become aware of the salvation they have enjoyed all along as "anonymous Christians."

Rahner's theory was soon developed by his German disciples H. R. Schlette and J. Heiselbetz, who concluded that other religions are the "ordinary ways of salvation for their adherents." Hubertus Halfab, a radical supporter of Rahner, carried this position to its extreme and argued that the mission of the church is to make "Muslims better Muslims, Buddhists better Buddhists and Hindus better Hindus."

Almost simultaneously, Asian Roman Catholic theologians applied Rahner's view to the historic Eastern religions. Raimundo Panikkar, a Spanish-Indian theologian and the most outspoken representative of this group, argued in *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (1965) that the pre-incarnate Christ wedded himself to Hinduism at the conception of its ancient, sacred books, the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. According to Panikkar, because Jesus is encountered in the mystic experiences of Indian yogis, as well as in the rituals performed in honor of Hindu deities, there is no need to evangelize Hindus in an effort to convert them to Christianity. Instead, Panikkar advocated "dialogue in depth" between Christians and Hindus that would enable both to experience the oneness of their mystic encounter. As the outcome of such dialogue, Panikkar visualized a mutual penetration of all religions and their respective spiritual heritages that would result in "one, holy, catholic and apostolic religion."

The biblical alternative to these ecumenical ideas that we will present is built upon two suppositions: First, Christian conversion is supernatural, and second, it is unique. On both points the biblical position collides head on with prevailing ecumenical modern sentiments.

### CONVERSION IS SUPERNATURAL

In what sense is conversion supernatural? Is it supernatural in the sense that God is the primary and direct cause of all human behavior, so that acts of faith are really his, rather than the penitent's? Most Christian thinkers have found this type of determinism injurious to biblical teaching. Is conversion supernatural in the sense that God is its indirect cause? This is an arguable position. God certainly is the indirect cause of conversion in at least three senses. 1) Without God's saving action in Christ, conversion would not be possible. 2) Without the convincing work of the Holy Spirit, conversion would not

be desirable. And 3) without the function of the Scriptures, conversion would not be Christian.

Reformed theologians add a fourth sense: Without regeneration, conversion would be unthinkable, for regeneration and conversion are related as cause and effect. The creative, regenerative work of God produces an overwhelming desire to turn from sin and conveys the ability to believe in Christ, though initially God's regenerative work may take place below the level of consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

What is the mechanism of conversion that causes inward change? The answers a Christian gives to this question are not compatible with modern assumptions. The modern worldview understands conversion as part of human behavior, or as part of abnormal behavior, whose causes are strictly natural and discoverable. Conversion is the purely natural effect of purely natural causes. This secular understanding of human behavior severs it from any divine or spiritual reality and treats it as a thing in itself that is self-originated and self-interpreting.

It is true that conversion is a type of human behavior that involves deep and complex psychological and sociological changes. Being a form of human behavior, however, does not preclude conversion from also having a divine component or cause, just as conversion's psychological dimension does not preclude the presence of a spiritual aspect, and just as conversion's personal nature does not preclude the reality of conflict with supernatural forces of good and evil.

Biblical Christianity always has acknowledged conversion's spiritual dimension. In fact the Protestant Reformation was precipitated by the conviction that God's saving grace could be neither triggered nor augmented by anything we do. The Reformers believed that God has not accomplished part of our salvation and left us to complete the other part through obedience and good works. Instead, they taught that God's salvation in Christ is free, perfectly complete, and is

accepted and entered into by faith alone.

This fundamental conviction, however, is tested anew in each generation. Fallen people have a persistent tendency to believe that their behavior somehow completes what God has left incomplete. This leads to the belief that salvation is a cooperative work. In the sixteenth century this sort of synergism (syncretism) was understood ecclesiastically: religious obedience to the church was added to grace. Today in the West, this sort of synergism (syncretism) is understood psychologically: self-development and self-gratification are added to grace to produce a “holistic” person. In some Third World countries, this sort of synergism is understood politically: involvement in causes that promote justice is added to grace to produce a new society. Regardless of the means and understanding, all such synergistic (syncretistic) theories violate the principle of the all sufficiency of God’s grace in salvation.

The God of the Bible is a jealous God. All attempts to add human effort to God’s grace denigrate and destroy grace. Therefore God is intolerant of our attempts to assist grace, whether they are ecclesiastical, psychological, or political in nature, and he is jealous for the purity of the grace he offers.

Grace that needs human assistance for completion is nothing more than divine help. It is nothing more than God supplying what we cannot do alone. Grace that is nothing more than a divine helping hand is not biblical grace. For according to the Bible, God’s grace single-handedly accomplishes what he intends it to achieve, with no admixture of human help.

The discussion of God’s grace assumes that there is a relationship between God and ourselves within a single natural-supernatural reality. God’s grace is supernatural, in so far as it is quite different from human potential, power, or wisdom; but it is “natural,” in so far as God and his works are not oddities or bizarre intrusions in the world but are properly part of it. Given the structure of the world, the shape of human person-

ality, and the content of human experience, the reality of God is as natural as the existence of water for fish. God is what our world and lives demand, and without him both are painful enigmas.

### CONVERSION IS UNIQUE

Conversion is not uniquely Christian, but Christian conversion is unique and uniquely true. If we focus on behavioral changes, Christian conversion may be difficult to distinguish from some other types of conversion. If we focus on Christ to whom the sinner has turned in faith,

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Christian conversion is as different from other forms of conversion as Christ is from the founders of other faiths.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the uniqueness of Christian conversion has been obscured. Conversion has come to be understood in purely subjectivistic terms as changed behavior. The objective realities of conversion—its divine origin, supernatural change, and eternal results—have been downplayed and rejected. Additionally, evangelical “testimonies” about God’s saving grace in Christ are understood as nothing more

than personal biographies that attribute changed behavior to Christ. Critics of Christianity point to similar testimonies in non-Christian religions. Although most Christian testimonies are sincerely intended, and though God uses them to bring people to salvation, testimonies are not the best way to explain Christianity to non-Christians.

If Christianity is true, then by definition Christians will have experienced Christ. They will have a personal, living knowledge of Christ as God incarnate. They will know him as the humble, suffering servant who bore their sins and God’s judgment on the cross. They will acknowledge him as the sinless anointed Messiah whom God raised from the dead. They will worship him as the King of kings who conquered both death and the Prince of Darkness and who will return victorious and in great power. They will rejoice in their knowledge of Jesus as the Great High Priest who has opened heaven and the very supernatural power of God to believers. They will experience God’s forgiveness of their sins. They will know what it is to return in the rags and tatters of human depravity, with no right to a place in God’s house, and to be welcomed, drawn in, clothed with fine robes, and feasted at a banquet in their honor. They will experience and know the indwelling power and presence of God’s Spirit, who will assure them of their salvation, of God’s mighty presence in their lives, and of their belonging to God’s people. And they will be able to speak of these things from their hearts. If Christian faith is true—and it is—there will be experience of which they can speak!

Nevertheless, there are two ways in which we need to exercise vigilance in the way we describe our conversion experience. First, the typical evangelical testimony usually departs significantly from the New Testament pattern of witness-bearing. In the New Testament, believers witness to Christ, not to their experience of Christ. They focus on the objective realities of salvation—on Christ and his work—not on their experience of this work.

Second, testimonies that stake the truth of Christianity on the experiences being narrated, rather than basing the truth of Christianity on Christ himself, confuse people by directing their attention away from Christ, who is unique, to human experiences, which may not sound or be unique. For example, if the truth of the gospel is tied to a testimony of transformation and change, then non-Christians can point to similar stories of transformation and change in non-Christian religions, sects, cults, or even among users of certain drugs. Under the best of circumstances, our own experiences are difficult to evaluate. The experiences of others are even more difficult. To evaluate experiences properly, we need what we usually do not have—a deep and accurate knowledge of a person's true character and the full record of his or her life. People who give testimonies usually are strangers to us. Since we know little about their characters and their lives, how can we evaluate the truth and the validity of their testimonies? How can we discern the authentic from the unauthentic or even from counterfeit conversion stories?

Furthermore, we need to be careful about the way testimonies function in the overall body of Christian teaching. Perhaps because of the influence of revivals, and perhaps because in our pluralistic society we feel the need to produce some irrefutable evidence that Christianity is true, evangelicals tend to treat conversion in a way that it was not treated in the biblical worldview. Conversion is important, and no one should diminish this. Apart from those converted in childhood, few Christians are likely to forget their conversion experience. But conversion is not an experience that stands alone. It is the doorway to the building of salvation. And God does not want us to stand in the doorway, marveling at the threshold. He wants us to enter the building and marvel at what is inside.

Our continuing vulnerability in this matter is made clear when we insist that Jesus must be Lord, as well as Savior. Many people who have experienced conversion exhibit little subsequent maturity and growth. Many of them can give eloquent testimonies of how they came to

Christ, but when pressed, they can say little about how they are going on with Christ. To insist that they need to follow Christ in obedience as their Lord, in addition to having him as their Savior, is an extraordinary admission of failure on our part and theirs. The apostles did not distinguish Christ as Lord and Christ as Savior. According to the Bible, it is Christ the Lord who saves us from our sins (Rom. 10:8-13). *To receive Christ the Savior is to receive him as Lord.* To repent of sin and trust Christ's death for salvation involves trusting the living, resurrected, exalted Lord to apply the benefits of his death and resurrection to us. *Only if he is Lord can he save us.* To our shame, we have almost stood the New Testament on its head. Ours has become an anemic gospel that demands little of the convert in terms of repentance and obedience, and consequently Christ receives little from us by way of commitment and service.

True conversion is not an isolated experience but one that is related to a life of discipleship. Conversion is the point in time and experience at which we enter into such a life. Discipleship belongs to and should follow from conversion the way that natural life belongs to and follows from live birth. Just as there is no life without birth, so there is no birth without an ensuing life, however long or short that life may be. And just as there is no discipleship without conversion, so there is no conversion without an ensuing life of discipleship that involves growth in moral maturity, a deepening faith, and loving service.

Conversion is the doorway that is inextricably linked to the house of Christian faith. Although Christianity is objectively true, regardless of our believing it, how we understand our believing deeply affects what we understand Christian faith to be. If we understand sin correctly, and if we have a clear vision of Christ's substitutionary work on the cross, we will see that the biblical doctrine of conversion is a necessary and inevitable corollary of the Bible's teaching about sin and salvation.

But however we and our churches choose to commend Christian faith, we need to begin this study by reminding ourselves that the faith we commend is not

Christian if it is not centered upon and determined by Christ. It is the historical Jesus, who is personally identical with the Christ of the resurrection, who is the objective of our faith, its ground and its reason. Without him, there is no faith, at least, there is no true Christian faith. And without a Christ unique in who he was and what he did, there can be no belief that is in any sense biblical. Christian faith is about a Christ who is without peer, equal, or parallel. He stands alone as God incarnate. He stands alone as one in whom, and because of whom, sin, death, and the devil have been conquered. Faith in such a Christ is faith that by its very nature is different from faith in any other person or cause in this world.

## ENDNOTES

- [Editor's note: This article is a reprint of the "Introduction" from David Wells's book (now out of print) entitled *Turning to God: Biblical Conversion in the Modern World*. His whole book was written for the purpose to help us thoroughly understand Christian conversion in light of its modern alternatives.]
- Of course, not all Protestants in the WCC are non-evangelicals, just as not all Protestants outside the WCC are evangelicals.
- Recent liberation theologies have developed this idea along the lines of the Marxist doctrine of class struggle.
- The two catchwords *shalom* and *humanization* depict this concept.
- Even Wesleyan forms of Arminianism argue for prevenient grace, the grace of God without which no one can believe but in the presence of which no one has to believe. Thus even Wesleyanism, with its modified concept of regeneration, understands God's grace as the cause of the conversion of those who choose to believe. These are talking points for initiates-for those who accept a Christian world view-and for those who are seeking to understand their own conversion.

Photo here  
of  
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