

CONVERSION

P.F. JENSEN

"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

I had to laugh when I heard one of the adverse comments made of Billy Graham's visit to Sydney last year. Apparently some people criticised him because he only reached church-people with his message.

I thought that this was humorous for two reasons. First, because it's not true, and second because it is true.

It's not true because there are people outside the church who become Christians in this way. One of my friends had lost all touch with church and was well away from anything religious when he was reached by Billy Graham. His story has many parallels in Sydney. And it's no good thinking that these instant conversions never last ... unless you think that 21 years is not long enough to test the matter, for that's as long ago as it was.

On the other hand, the criticism is true, in this way. Lots of people who are converted, perhaps the majority, already go to church. But why is this thought to be odd? I think it is first-rate.

You see it is a common mistake to suppose that church-going turns you into a Christian. We are not born Christians, and merely associating with Christians doesn't change that, any more than sitting up a gum tree would make me a koala, or being buried in a potato patch would turn me into a King Edward spud. In the kingdom of God it's not who you came in with, or who your parents were, or what rituals you may perform; it's not even a matter of whether you are decent and respectable. What God requires is not nice people, but new people.

It stands to reason, actually. If you make a careful diagnosis of your own life and thoughts you'll soon discover that you have a large quarrel with God. You want to be master of your life; Jesus Christ is the rightful master. So we reject him. Some of us do it point-blank, with oaths and curses; others ignore the problem and hope it will go away (which it won't); others carry out long-distance negotiations: they mix with religious people, they go to church, and they lead respectable lives.

But none of these attitudes will solve the problem of our own rebellion against God. What we need is a thorough turn around, a conversion. That is why when Billy Graham preaches he warns us to stop rebelling against God, and to submit to the rule of Jesus Christ or face God's judgment. In that way all our sins will be forgiven, since Christ died to save us, and lives to be our king. In that way a new and powerful force will flood our lives and we will be converted.

I'm sorry that more people outside the church are not reached by this message, but I'm very glad that unconverted, rebellious church-attending people are. We need it as much as anyone - and I ought to know, because that's exactly what happened to me, 21 years ago.

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