

My Conversion to Christianity

A Snapshot in Time

Prologue – I was raised in a PCUSA Church. I attended worship services and Sunday School classes fairly regularly, and I was confirmed in the faith at age 12. The only problem was that I didn't have saving faith in Jesus Christ. At age 14 I began asking awkward questions like, "Can you explain predestination to me?" "Why am I being blamed for something Adam did?" "I haven't done anything that deserves hell. Why isn't being a good person enough to save me?" "What's Calvinism all about?" The answer I got was, "We aren't too much into dogma here." Obviously they had no answers. So I left the Church.

I studied other religions, philosophy, history, science, and literature. I sought answers to my questions about whether there is a God, what he expects of his creatures, and what life is all about. I ran into dead-ends and empty words. Religion replaces reality with imaginary truths made visible through ritual. Philosophy (except for epistemology) proves its assertions by carefully defining its terms, turning quests for truth into word-games. History paints a caricature of events and people in order to advocate the historian's political and cultural preferences. Scientists base their conclusions on their worldview instead of the facts. Literature constructs an artificial world in which the author gets to play God, reshaping reality in the author's image.

It all struck me as self-indulgence. Objective truth, it occurred to me, was not going to be found in any of this. There were only hints of it, partially captured. It's like the old anecdote of five blind men holding onto an elephant, each one trying to describe the elephant to the others using only the part they have hold of. We seem to favor our own truth without troubling to lay hold of the entire truth. And so we dance around it, taunted by its elusiveness.

I did a four-year stint in the Navy during the Vietnam War in the late 60's. I came back home in 1971. The next fall I went back to college and took up political science, still searching for answers. I wanted to know how we could attain peace and tranquility in this world where men are corrupt and inept? How do we make sense of a world gone mad? I thought if we had the right political system, then maybe things could work out. What I found after four years of intense study is that any political system will work – if the people are righteous.¹

Frustrated, I went off to Law School in 1976. I thought that if we were to have a righteous people, then we must have righteous laws to make them so. But laws don't make people righteous. Laws are written by corrupt people in our congresses, interpreted by corrupt people in our courthouses, and enforced by corrupt people in our administrations. That rule holds true no matter where we are in the world. Corruption isn't found in our societies, governments, or laws, but in our souls. We have corrupt hearts. This revelation accounted for everything I studied in school about the nature of man, and everything I personally experienced in life. But it didn't end my quest. The heart cannot be changed by education or any other external constraint. We need an inward change of heart. If we can change the inner man, we can change the outer world – not the other way around.

¹ Ben Franklin as he exited the Constitutional Convention: "there is no form of government but what may be a blessing to the people if well administered for a course of years, and can only end in despotism, as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other."

OK. So what can change the heart of man? What can turn a selfish, grasping individual into a giving, self-sacrificing... saint? Not religion. That's an external. Externals left me starving. I had trashed Christianity in my youth, blaming it for all the ills of the world. But I was looking at it as a religion. What if it actually had an answer, but the depravity of man perverted it like everything else? Is depravity part of our very nature? Is it an inherent attribute of humanity? James Madison thought so. I just couldn't accept that. Surely there was a solution to our depravity. What did Christ actually teach us about it? Life would have no meaning and provide no satisfaction until I found out. It seemed that the American Dream just wasn't enough for me.

So in 1979 I felt compelled (or urged) to begin reading the Bible. I had rejected and denounced it for many years. If I had any intellectual integrity at all, I had to read it for myself to find the answers to my questions. I couldn't rely on hearsay. Did it correlate with life as I knew it? Was it fantasy and myth, or was it an accurate portrayal of reality? As I read it, I became riveted. It was obviously eye-witness testimony. It was accurate, holding back nothing as it described the depravity of men and their inability to change. The writers described themselves as ignorant and bumbling instead of puffing themselves up; it was unlike any other literature I'd ever read. I found myself reading it before work, on breaks, and after work. Then I began to read it out loud to my co-workers, fascinated by the stories and principles that I found there.

In April 1980 I had an opportunity to move to Colorado for a new job. I would have to leave my wife, son, and newborn child behind for awhile. I didn't know how long it would be before they could join me. We needed to sell the old house and buy a new one. We also needed a bridge loan so I would have a house ready when they arrived. Nervous, I started to pray to this God of my youth, this unknown God, for safety in travel, and for the care of my wife and children. In the end, I would be without my wife and children for three months. I sat there in my apartment alone, reading and studying the Word of God, searching for the truth.

As I was looking for a house, I drove by a church and stopped to read its sign: "Village Seven Presbyterian Church. Bernhard Kuiper, Pastor." I resolved to attend the following Sunday to get some answers. When I got back to the apartment, the phone was ringing. We got the bridge loan. There was a lot to do, people to see, contracts to set up, etc. A day or two went by and I thought, "Maybe I don't need to go to that church after all. I've got a lot to do..." The phone rang. The bridge loan had fallen through. I was a little frantic. I started contacting folks. I called my wife. A couple more days went by. As I stood there thinking that I really ought to go to that church, the phone rang. The bridge loan was back on. The hairs went up on the back of my neck. I sat down, shaking. I called my wife and said, "I think I'm losing my mind." I explained to her what was going on. She said, "You've always been a bit strange, honey." Great.

That Sunday, I walked into the church after a twenty-year hiatus. Bernie Kuiper was preaching on the *Five Points of Calvinism*. God hadn't missed a beat. He picked up the conversation right where we left off twenty years earlier. I wrote a 10-page letter to Bernie saying, "I know you have to preach this stuff, but it makes no sense to me. Augustine said the underlying cause of all sin is pride. If these are God's chosen people, that elevates pride; it doesn't diminish it. How can God solve the problem of sin by creating a chosen people for himself?" Bernie called me at my apartment and invited me to come see him. He wanted to know my background, whether I was a

Christian, had I been to church before, what kind of education did I have, what was I doing for a living – I couldn't figure out what he was after. He said, "You've been to law school, right? So I know you'll read these books." He handed over a stack of five or six books including the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, one on the doctrine of election, and a couple of others. I got about halfway through them when I gave Bernie a call. "I have no idea what I objected to twenty years ago. These books accurately and fairly portray the truth of the Bible. Now all I have to do is figure out if I actually believe the Bible is the Word of God. If it isn't, I'm lost. I have no place left to go. Everything else has led me to a dead-end."

Bernie spent the next four weeks concluding the Five Points of Calvinism, nailing down the essential doctrines of the reformed faith. Years later he would ask me to transcribe those five sermons and turn them into a book. They were life-changing for me. That was twenty-six years ago. The memory plays tricks, and we tend to embellish our experiences. So I was surprised and delighted to come across an unsent letter to Bernie a few weeks ago. It was written two days after I came to Christ, just two months after entering the church in 1980. It's like opening a time-capsule. There are no corrections, addendums, or justifications. Just the facts as I perceived them at the time. It's pretty hard to find eye-witness testimony recorded in this way. I've clarified some things in the footnotes to avoid any misconceptions. This letter provides a rare glimpse into the mind of the convert at the point of conversion.

5/27/80

Dear Pastor Kuiper,

Something has happened since Sunday night. Trust me; I'm conservative, pragmatic, down to earth, but an unusual and very reassuring transformation is taking place within me. God's grace has fallen on me. I don't deserve it. I was told by the Holy Ghost and through God's Word that I had no hope of redemption. I was supposed to act as a living corpse, a sort of mirror and reminder to the congregation that to turn against God was to return to the flesh without hope of regeneration into the Spirit.² My sentence was like Moses' looking at the Promised Land but barred from entering: a guide only.

I was told to testify at the fellowship meeting like a child whose parents tell him to apologize to the friend he hurt. I went unwillingly to my task.³ What I said is vague to me now, but I received only positive responses. One man said he wasn't sure he liked what I had to say – funerals are rarely pleasant – but he appreciated it.

² Bad theology, but this reveals the depth of my despair. I had been raised in and confirmed in the faith as a child. I left the Church at 14. I was convinced here that I had been saved, but having turned my back on God, there was no coming back: Heb 6:4-6 "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and became partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powerful deeds of the age to come, and having fallen away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and hold Him up to contempt." However, I now realize that I had never really known Christ. I had not been "enlightened" or "tasted of the heavenly gift." All I had was a rudimentary knowledge of the Scripture without any understanding or saving faith. I was *not* twice saved. What I could not hear in my despair was that I had no hope of redemption *apart from Christ*. The Spirit was revealing to me just how great and deep the chasm was that separated me from God. And that's all you're hearing here.

³ I wasn't hearing an audible voice, but I had extraordinary impressions of things I needed to do, and when I needed to do them. I was afraid for my sanity. I was "being told" to confess to the Church where I had been for the past 20 years, and what I had done to oppose Christ and the Church (similar to Paul's confession). I wasn't an agnostic; I was a full-blown atheist. I did everything I could to destroy the faith of believers and challenge the truth of God. I had immersed myself in other religions and philosophies, participated in reprehensible acts of depravity, indulged in drunken binges and drugs, and other things that cannot even be mentioned (Eph 5:12). I had publicly wandered in the desert those 20 years, and I was being led to publicly confess my sin. I'm afraid I may have shocked and confused a lot of folks sitting there that night.

Afterward I drove home and a fire suddenly raged in my head – I hadn't felt that sense of pain and remorse and desolation and guilt since the death of my mother. My brain was aflame. I'd lost a precious gem. Tears streamed down my face; then I settled into a sense of resignation. If I had the opportunity to keep someone else from falling into my own predicament, then at least I had some purpose – but I would be unwelcome either in Heaven or in Hell. So be it. Judgment comes to both. Better to be the least offensive in Hell than a willing accomplice to the Fallen Angel. He tempted me nonetheless that having fallen away, I might as well take the full plunge and enjoy this world if the next was to be denied me.⁴ I resisted.⁵

I stopped off to see “Apocalypse Now” at the local theatre to get a glimpse of what was in store for me. It had no effect on me, as if my heart had been anesthetized. I went home, parked the car, and walked into the field to pray. I looked up at the stars and the crystal clear moon and tried to pray. I wanted to say, “Jesus Christ is my one and only Savior.” It was a phrase that had evaded me for nearly twenty years, even though I'd prayed to him and received his favors – strange... I couldn't say it. I was void, an emptied shell, a container with nothing to contain. I sighed and went to bed, a single tear trickling off my chin.

Next day I went to help paint the church. I felt I couldn't become a member. I didn't have the right. I'd be lucky if the congregation let me stay; more to the point, they were obliged to shut me out.⁶ Several members told me they'd prayed for me and would keep me in their prayers. It was somehow reassuring. At key points during my 20 year sojourn others had prayed for me and I can only believe that this was an impetus for the Holy Spirit to stay with me.⁷ I was embarrassed and wanted to hide myself like some leper fearing to contaminate another human being.

I went home and began to pray. At last I got out that most difficult phrase, “Jesus is my one and only Savior.” I prayed to him and through him to the Father. I asked for the help of the Holy Ghost to fill the empty vessel of my heart. I offered myself to his service. I argued, I pleaded, I submitted. Dead silence. Nothing. The corpse remained in his self-dug grave.⁸ No feeling. No responsiveness within or without. “Lord, can I have declared Jesus as my savior and not have felt it in my heart?” Empty silence.

“Lord, I cannot inspire my own faith. Only *you* can grant me that faith. Please, God, send me the Holy Spirit to lead me to Christ. I can't do it on my own!”

⁴ 1Cor 15:12 If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” Isa 22:12-14

⁵ James 4:7 Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

⁶ Keep in mind that I thought I was apostate. 1Cor 5:9-119 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.

⁷ Ps 51:11; Gen 20:7; 1Sam 12:23; Job 42:8; Jms 5:16

⁸ This was the actual imagery in my mind as I prayed. I had this vision of a hollowed-out carcass and a line on the floor where I was knelt in prayer. The line was the chasm, the void between me and God – I was separated from him by this thin line of faith. I just couldn't cross it without God's help. So in my mind I shoved the carcass across the line, saying “Take it. It's not doing me any good. I have everything the American dream tells me I'm supposed to have, and I'm lost, miserable. Take it.” I was terrified of crossing that line, fearful that my will would be lost and I would become some kind of mindless automaton. I had no idea what awaited me “on the other side” of faith. I couldn't lay down my will.

“Let me be your instrument; let me be a conduit of the living water. *Please* Lord. Use me as you will.” Empty silence.

I went to watch some T.V. Several hours went by. I opened my Bible to the place where I’d left off. I’d read the passage several times before, but suddenly it wasn’t my voice reading the words. The *Word* came at me as an answer in Romans 10:8; the Bible throbbed with life:

“The word, that is the faith we proclaim, is very near to you; it is on your lips and in your heart. If your lips confess that Jesus is Lord and if you believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, then you will be saved. By believing from the heart you are made righteous; by confessing with your lips you are saved... for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

I was ecstatic. Tears again were streaming down my cheeks but they were tears of joy, not despair. The very words which had taunted me became my source of comfort and relief. My heart thrilled and returned to life.⁹ The same voice that led me back to the Church, and led me to publicly confess my sins, and told me that there was no hope of redemption, quietly said, “Welcome Home.” It was glorious. I went to bed – fitfully excited.

I woke up singing “I’m only a sinner” and later on “This is my Father’s World” and “Glory be to the Father” and “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” My despondency was gone, completely replaced by an assurance and – completeness. A smile was on my lips and it hasn’t left yet. I pray it continues. I’m not saved.¹⁰ I haven’t been baptized by the Holy Spirit in the sense of having power within me to be efficacious as God’s instrument.¹¹ But I do have hope where there was no hope before. I have been regenerated though I cannot prove it to you.¹² Yet I know it’s so. Something has happened but its extent I have no way of knowing at this time.

I believe I was cleansed, purged by the Holy Ghost following Sunday’s fellowship meeting.¹³ I believe I *will* become a vessel that can be used to dispense the Good News; I don’t know *how*. I wait and I listen for guidance. I do know that until I become versed in God’s Word, I cannot function effectively as his vehicle of communication. So that is first.

Thank you for your prayers and support. Coming Home hasn’t been easy.

Bill Gross

⁹ In my mind, the empty carcass was being pushed back across the line of faith, filled with life. I felt as though someone had poured warm liquid light over the top of my head, and it was cascading down my body. I knew that my will was still my own, but with it came responsibility. I called my brother and told him what had happened. I told him, “You’ll have to lay down your will. Do it! He’ll give it back!” He wasn’t surprised by my phone call. He’d been told by another believer that the word would come to him through his brother. Shortly after that, he came to Christ.

¹⁰ I was justified at this point, and I knew it. But theologically, salvation includes both justification and sanctification. So technically, in my own understanding, I was not saved. This sort of doctrinal confusion is what comes of reading a Systematic Theology before confessing Christ. You wind up with more knowledge than comprehension. That’s why the Gospel message is limited in scope. Hint.

¹¹ This is not referring to a Second Blessing. I received the Spirit at my confession of Christ. But the Spirit waxes and wains in us according to what God has prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:10). I was not prepared yet for what God had in mind for me to do. I am acknowledging here that I needed to become a workman approved unto God, one who need not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2Tim 2:15). My language was sloppy, and my understanding perhaps confused, but we are saved by grace, not doctrine, thanks be to God.

¹² In point of fact, I had been regenerated prior to my confession of faith in Christ alone. Without the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, we are deaf and blind, unable to understand the things of God. What I am describing here is my poor understanding of being born from above. For unless we are born from above, we cannot see (know) the kingdom of God (Jn 3:3). How does a newborn babe describe its own birth?

¹³ Not really. I knew only the baptism of John at that point – which was a baptism of repentance. The actual cleansing took place at my confession of Christ. Water baptism is an external sign of our cleansing by the blood of Christ through faith. I did not understand yet that we are merely *declared* perfectly righteous by God with regard to our justification, but we are never perfectly righteous in deed. That’s grace.

Epilogue: Between the text of my letter and my footnotes, I hope you appreciate the need to properly ground believers in the doctrines of the Bible before obtaining a profession of faith. We don't need a perfect or comprehensive understanding before we confess our faith in Christ – but we do need sufficient understanding. After writing this letter, not having sent it, I shared what had happened with pastor Bernhard Kuiper and with his associate pastor, David Linden. Both were troubled by the description I gave them. They only heard the experience, not the gospel. So David challenged my understanding of who Christ is and what he accomplished on the cross. He wanted to be sure I understood the biblical Gospel before he would accept my confession of Christ as a valid confession. Good move. I did grasp the Gospel correctly, but some of my additional experiences needed to be put in proper perspective.

A declaration of faith is not just an emotional impression or a private religious experience, which was vividly described in this letter and in my footnotes. It is public, and it is driven by a rational understanding of the truth of God. The Spirit moves us to understand and to confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. How he does that is a mystery. Sometimes it has a profound impact on our mind and emotions, as reflected in my own experience. But in the end, we must freely and understandingly confess the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord. His atonement is the only basis of God's forgiveness. His righteousness is the only foundation of our justification. We can neither add to nor take away from what he has done for us. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone, standing on Scripture alone as illumined for us by the Spirit of God. None of this requires a religious experience, nor does it negate such an experience. Our emotions can reflect guilt, shame, and remorse as easily as true repentance and belief. Religious experience, even if valid, does not validate Scripture.

We may be rightly dismayed and convicted by our sinfulness, as I was. We may be rightly emotional as God draws us to himself, as I was. But that is no substitute for believing the truth of God. Having a religious experience is not a ground for faith. It does not prove conversion. Apart from the truth of God's word, it has no value – it does not confirm, clarify, or explain God's word. Our perception of spiritual reality is distorted by our sinful nature, our depravity. Thus we are not saved according to the quality or extent of our religious experience. We only need the faith of a mustard seed to be saved. Passion may accompany our profession of faith in Christ, but it's never a substitute for accurate belief. On the other hand, cold intellectualism can be just as deceptive as mere emotionalism. So it's OK to believe passionately.

I've never again had the sort of dramatic experience that this letter describes. Yet my communion with God, my dialogue with him through prayer, and his dialogue with me through his word, has never diminished in intensity. Notice that on the night I came to Christ, what God had to say to me came directly through his word, firmly impressed on me by his Spirit. It is not a disembodied or disassociated inner voice. The voice of God has been recorded for us in Scripture. Whatever inner voice we hear must agree with what he has written there. We don't need to search elsewhere, and we don't need a religious experience to make the Gospel true. God's word is self-attesting. God's Spirit makes it so.