

Voices: Is conversion the cure America needs?

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Is conversion the cure we need? If more people became Christian, would we make progress on the social issues like racism, violence and poverty?



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Prominent theologians and politicians say, “Yes.”

When asked what she thought were the deepest, systemic causes of generational poverty in San Antonio, Mayor Ivy Taylor responded, “It’s broken people ... people not being in a relationship with their Creator, and therefore not being in a good relationship with their families and their communities ... and not being productive members of society.” Mayor Taylor was voted out of office.

In his book, *Bloodlines: Race, Cross and the Christian*, best-selling author and pastor John Piper discusses the biblical argument for racial reconciliation for Christians but suggests what is needed is simply conversion. He argues the solution to racism “is not government help or self-help, but the gospel of Jesus Christ” and “what is needed is a miracle.”

Gov. Matt Bevin of Kentucky urged residents of Louisville to commit to

walk in small groups through high-crime neighborhoods, pausing to pray at each corner and chat with people they meet two or three times a week for a year. The plan is built upon harnessing the power of prayer and evangelism for the sake of transforming violence and poverty.

More than conversion



These plans for civil transformation assume conversion is the cure. It assumes Christians behave. It assumes Christians really will love their neighbor. Yet we need more than conversion.

We also need calling.

When we consider the transcendent moments of conversion in Scripture, they often are associated with a call to action. Conversion provides a means to transforming not only the individual but the community.

The blinding light knocks Paul off his high horse. The risen Christ calls him to ministry that includes reconciling Jews and Gentiles under the banner of Christ Jesus. The blinding light is only the beginning of the story.

When he sees God sitting high and lofty on the throne with the host of seraphs asking, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah answers, "Here am I; send me!" This acceptance of the lordship of God and the response to God's call is not the end of the story but the beginning.

When Jesus walks by the shoreline calling the fishermen to be fishers of men, they leave their boats and follow him on the greatest journey of all.

Not enough

Conversion in the Bible does not mean perfection. The disciples scatter before the shadow of the cross. Even the converted in Acts fall prey to greed and deceit.

Mayor Taylor, Rev. Piper and Gov. Bevin are not the first public leaders to suggest conversion as the key to solving social ills. Conversion as a means of social transformation of institutions is not a new idea.

Civil rights leader John Perkins believed incarnational evangelism and personal salvation were the most significant impetuses for racial reconciliation. But Perkins was a Baptist whose study of the Bible also led him to agitate for change to public policy.

Clarence Jordan advocated for social change by starting Koinonia Farms in south Georgia to live out the teachings of Jesus. He believed the best way to solve the ills of society was to form beloved communities shaped by the Spirit of Jesus. The presence of a community like Koinonia was a testament to the radical call of discipleship.

Just the beginning

However, Perkins and Jordan believed conversion is just the beginning. After we are converted, we are invited to follow. The “miracle motif” espoused by Taylor, Piper and Bevin appears to assume conversion is the end.

And even though they are evangelicals, their theology grossly underestimates the power of sin.

John Perkins was jailed in Mississippi and tortured all night long by Bible-believing Christians. Even in the heart of the Bible Belt, Koinonia Farms repeatedly was the target of drive-by shootings—shootings rarely condemned by local churches. When Jordan died, the county coroner refused to come out to the farm to issue a death certificate.

The men who perpetrated these acts were Christians.

It's going to take more than conversion to make progress on social ills like racism, violence and poverty. It's going to take more than individual piety to create a more just society. The highly individualized theology of American Christianity leaves us hamstrung to face the social problems of our time.

The conversion cure subtly assumes If everyone had the same experience of Christ as I do, then everyone would be like me. If everyone were like me, then we would have peace and justice.

This is no cure. This is baptizing selfishness and calling it gospel.

The line between good and evil runs through each of us. We see through a glass darkly. We need to be cautious of any suggestion for a miracle cure for society's ills this side of the kingdom of God—even when that suggestion is made in Jesus' name.

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