

Don't Underestimate the Supernatural Power of Conversion

When my new friend Shannon McNeal was just a little boy, his older brothers put him in a washing machine, turned on the water and sat on the lid to trap him inside. Another time they taped him in a cardboard box and threw it down a flight of stairs to see if he would survive. And once they put him in the kitchen oven, turned it on and blocked the door with a chair while he screamed.

Shannon's mom wasn't around to stop the brutality. A single mother, she worked long hours at a Ford automobile plant in Lorain, Ohio, near Cleveland. Her husband had walked out on the family when Shannon was 2, leaving the three fatherless boys to fend for themselves.

Without any boundaries, Shannon's brothers began dealing drugs as young teens, and they threw wild parties in their house while their mother was at the factory. Then a male relative exposed the boys to hardcore pornography. When Shannon was just 6 he was forced to watch pornographic videos; before he had even reached puberty he was expected to act out what he had seen with neighborhood girls.

By the time Shannon became a teenager he was drinking, abusing drugs and hanging out with members of the Bloods, a popular gang. The pain and confusion caused by abuse turned him into a ticking time bomb. He was angry and insecure. It was only a matter of time before he would get in trouble with the law. He finally landed in a state penitentiary for a drug-related crime.

As is often the case for guys like Shannon, the abuse that marred his childhood continued while he was in prison. Because

he is bi-racial (his mother is white, his father black), he was caught in the middle of the fray when racial tensions flared. During his 18-month incarceration, a fight erupted and a white inmate stabbed him in the back with a toothbrush that had been sharpened into a weapon.

Amazingly, Shannon survived the childhood abuse, the gang violence, the prison fights and—a few years later—two serious car wrecks, one that sent his head through a truck's windshield. After his last brush with death, a friend invited him to Freedom House in 2006.

Everything changed.

"I walked into that church and I felt love, and I knew that was what I had been looking for," Shannon told me last weekend. His wounded heart was healed—not only by the message of Jesus but also by the love of the Christians who didn't judge him for his mistakes.

"I had tried everything else to fix the person I was destroying," Shannon said, "so I decided to give the 'God thing' a chance. I slowly started realizing **God's love** through the people from my church that He led me to, and through the drastic changes He was making in me."

I spent time with Shannon this past weekend when I was preaching at Freedom House, a church located in Amherst, Ohio. He's happily married now, he's starting a business and is beginning to mentor troubled youth. He and his wife have a young daughter. Every door to his past is closed. He's forgiven the people who abused, neglected or rejected him. He's a totally new man with a bright smile, a servant's heart and a loving nature.

I'm sharing Shannon's story because many of us in so-called **Spirit-filled churches** have forgotten the raw power of conversion. Sometimes we get so caught up in the hoopla of **charismatic gifts**—chasing the latest glittering manifestations

and the trendiest **prophecies**—that we forget true conversion is the greatest miracle on the planet. Jesus Himself told us that it is only by the power of the **Holy Spirit** that someone can be born again (see John 3:5-7).

How I wish we pursued that **miracle** as passionately as we chased glory dust or goose bumps or spooky revelations. The devil is perfectly happy when we become preoccupied with spiritual sideshows. As long as he can lure us away from our primary mission of **evangelism** and discipleship, we really aren't a threat to his kingdom. But when people like Shannon McNeal are translated from darkness to light, their testimony sends hell into a panic.

Rescuing the lost has always been our mandate, but too often distractions pull us so far off course that we become religiously busy but spiritually fruitless. Of all the manifestations of the **Holy Spirit** available to us, conversion is the most precious—and the most powerful. In this fresh season of renewal I pray you and your church will reclaim it.

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