

Let's Pray American 'Christians' Experience Radical Conversions to Christ

Let's Pray for Radical Conversion Among American 'Christians': I read with interest Dr. Michael Brown's commentary on Brady "Phanatik" Goodwin's announcement that he was renouncing his Christian faith. What caught my eye was the impersonal and sterile nature of the faith he was renouncing. In explaining his decision, Goodwin said,

"I sent a letter to my church withdrawing my membership and saying that I am denouncing the Christian faith that I have believed, professed, proclaimed and defended for the last 30 years of my life."

My heart goes out to Goodwin, but it sounds as though his Christianity was rooted in externals such as church membership and a set of doctrinal beliefs that he has "defended" for much of his life. There is little indication of a warm and personal heart relationship with Christ.

By contrast, when we read the words of the early martyrs of the church, it is obvious they were not laying down their lives for an institution or set of doctrines. Their testimonies are warm and passionate concerning their love and commitment to Christ.

For example, Polycarp (circa A.D. 69-155), pastor/bishop of Philippi, was martyred for his faith late in life. Brought before the pagan proconsul of the region and given the option of renouncing Christ or being burned alive, Polycarp passionately replied, "For eighty-six years I have been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?"

Polycarp obviously did not see himself dying for a mere set of doctrines. It was a person he was representing, and this person meant everything to him. This is not to downplay the importance of doctrine but to remind us that it is a person who saves us, not a doctrine.

John Wesley discovered this in a very dramatic fashion. He was ordained as a minister in the Anglican Church and even went to Georgia as a missionary; but according to his own testimony, he was a Christian in name only for his faith was in the external forms of Christianity and not Christ Himself. This all changed when he visited a Moravian society where someone was reading Martin Luther's *Preface to Romans*.

As Wesley listened to how Luther described the change that comes when a person puts their faith in Christ and Him alone, he had a life-changing experience that he considered to be the time of his conversion. He wrote, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sin, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Wesley was never the same. After this conversion experience, he spearheaded the great Methodist Revival that transformed the British Isles and impacted the church around the world.

I am not suggesting that Goodwin was not truly saved. Only God knows the heart. His words, nonetheless, remind me not only of Wesley's experience but also that of Pandita Ramabai (1855-1922), a remarkable Christian woman whose life was transformed when she came to the realization that she too was a Christian in name only.

Pandita was reared in a devout Hindu home in India but decided to convert to Christianity as a young woman while studying in England. She, therefore, joined the Church of England, was baptized and began studying to defend her new religion to

family and friends.

But two years after her conversion, she came to the realization that she had, as she put it, merely “changed religions.” Her faith was in the external formalities of Christianity, not the person of Christ. She realized she was a Christian in name only.

She bowed before the Lord and gave herself completely up to Him. Her life was revolutionized as she experienced the new birth of which Jesus spoke. Her faith was now in Christ Himself, and it was very personal, heartfelt and dynamic.

In 1905, she began a prayer meeting with the 500 residents of the orphanage she had founded. She announced that the purpose of the prayer meeting was to pray for the conversion, not of the Hindus or the Muslims, but of all the Christians in India.

She realized from her own experience that many who called themselves Christians had only a superficial faith based on the outward formalities of Christianity. Their faith was in church membership or the fact they had once been baptized or the fact they attended church. Their faith was not in Christ Himself.

Out of this prayer meeting, a great revival was ignited that spread throughout India. Multitudes of “Christians” encountered the living Christ and their lives were transformed. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, young orphan girls went out preaching the gospel in the surrounding Indian villages.

The revival attracted visitors from far and near, including American missionaries who were in awe of what they observed. So great was Pandita’s social impact that in 1989, the Indian government issued a postage stamp in her honor with her picture.

If Goodwin’s faith was like that of Wesley’s or Pandita’s

before their conversion, I pray that he will turn to Jesus with all his heart and come to know Him in a real and personal way. This is what Christianity is all about, for Jesus Himself said in John 17:3 (MEV), “This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent.”

It is safe to say that our nation is filled with those who are “Christian” in name only. Perhaps we would do well to pray for their conversion. When such nominal (name only) Christians awaken to their condition and turn to Jesus with all their hearts, the church comes alive and becomes a transformative force in society.

It happened with Wesley in 18th-century England and with Pandita in 20th-century India, and it can happen with us in 21st-century America. {eoa}

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